GAMEINFORMER

EDITOR'S NOTE

NEW AND OLD PERSPECTIVES

AS YOU PAGE THROUGH THIS ISSUE, you'll see several articles penned by people making their *GI* debut. You may also recognize a name that's a blast from the past. Moving forward, we hope to bring you a more comprehensive selection of articles from various voices, some well-known in the video game industry and others receiving their first bylines.

The first piece you'll run into is a dissection of a Cuphead boss by writer Ben Bertoli, the author of the book *101 Video Games to Play Before You Grow Up*. He is also a featured writer on *IGN*, *Polygon*, and *Crunchyroll*. Next is a look at the intriguing upcoming release Soulstice, from writer Jay Castello, who has penned many excellent pieces for *Fanbyte*, *The Verge*, and more.

Former *Game Informer* staffers John Carson and Bryan Vore also wrote reviews for Digimon Survive and MultiVersus, respectively. After departing *Game Informer* in 2015, Bryan worked with 2K Games on the WWE franchise. He is again writing about games and is a part of MinnMax, a wonderful Patreon-driven channel from former *Game Informer* video editor Ben Hanson.

We have dozens of other writers and creators we hope to work with in the months ahead, and we also want to bring in writers you want to read. You can send your recommendations to Reiner@GameInformer.com with the subject line "Featured Writer."

We hope you enjoy the issue and appreciate these excellent writers' new perspectives on games. And don't miss our world-exclusive look at God of War Ragnarök. The game looks stunning in the most bombastic and chaotic of ways. You can see it in action throughout the month on *Game Informer's* YouTube channel.

ANDREW REINER
Editor-In-Chief

WHAT I'M PLAYING
Saints Row, Rollerdrome, Fortnite

WHAT I'M WATCHING
The Sandman, What We Do in the Shadows, Evil

WHAT I'M READING
Judgment Day, Jurassic League, Edge of the Spider-Verse

NEXT VACATION
Galaxy's Edge ... Finally!

GAMEINFORMER

GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK

On August 10 and 11, *Game Informer's* Andrew Reiner and Jason Guisao sat down with Santa Monica Studio to gain new insights into God of War Ragnarök's overall direction, combat design, world traversal, and accessibility features. The team viewed roughly 10 minutes of gameplay footage and spent a few hours talking to the development team. The conception of the cover art dates back two years to the early days of the game's development. The final touches were applied in early August, days before we talked to the team.

GAMEINFORMER

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Margaret Andrews

Production Director

What am I watching? Nothing, absolutely nothing because I'm saving myself exclusively for *The Rings of Power*. Tolkien's Middle-earth has been a mainstay to my entertainment for so many years (shoutout to The Lord of the Rings Online!) and it's thrilling having something new to look forward to. My friends and I are planning a watch party (with a hobbit-approved menu, of course) and I'm contemplating a re-read of *The Lord of the Rings* this fall to round it all out. God help those showrunners if they get this thing wrong, though.

Marcus Stewart

Associate Editor

With exceptions like Neon White, I'm still having trouble finding games that engross me as much as Elden Ring did, but the search has allowed me to delve into other interests. Pro wrestling, namely WWE and AEW, has been exciting lately, and I recently started reading (and enjoying) *Seven Games* by Oliver Roeder. I'm even delving into painting again. Fun fact: I'm a natural artist and grew up taking art classes. Flexing that creative muscle again feels invigorating, and I hope to resharpen my dulled skillset.

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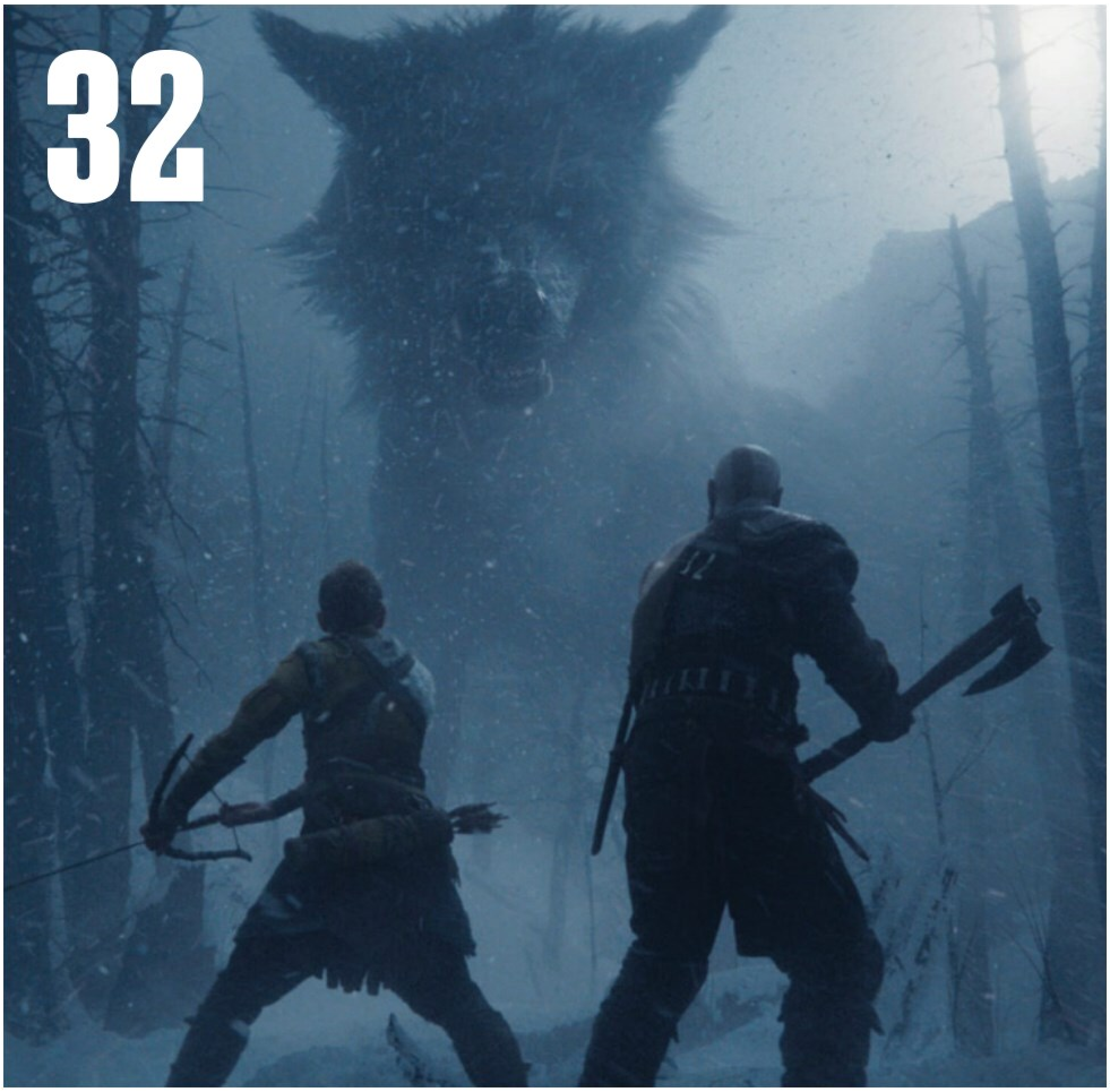

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8 EVO 2022

The fighting game community's biggest night returns. We sent our intrepid video editor Alex Van Aken to the show floor; here's what he saw.

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Cuphead is obviously most well-known for its excellent and brutal boss fights. But what goes into designing one? We talked to Studio MDHR about all the tiny decisions making up its iconic foes.

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Everyone's favorite sad dad is back. We've seen God of War Ragnarök and interviewed its development team. Here's what you need to know before heading back to Midgard.

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Soulstice is a new take on the hack 'n' slash formula. But the twist is, this time you're controlling two characters. Read our preview to find out why you should be excited.

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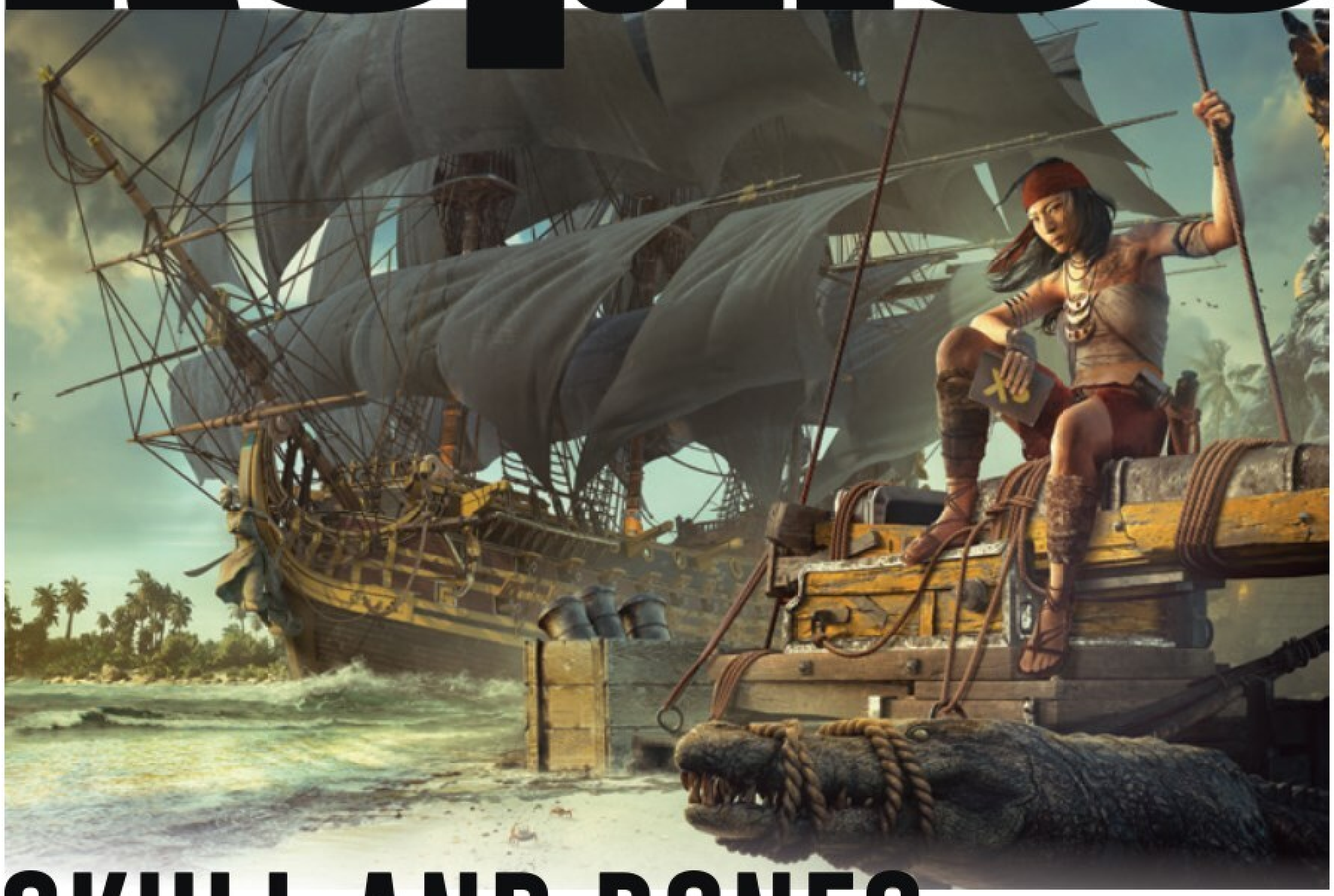


SKULL AND BONES

I tried to get into Sea of Thieves on Xbox. I enjoy the cooperative play required to keep a vessel afloat, but cartoony graphics didn't match my vision of being a pirate. Skull and Bones delivers the realistic lens I am seeking and also looks to offer a ton more customization. Thanks for the deep insight into the game – it's now my most anticipated of the year! **– Claire Fisk via email**

I don't understand what Ubisoft is doing. [The company] already had the perfect pirate formula in Assassin's Creed: Black Flag. All they had to do was strip away the Assassin's Creed content and make it something new and even more pirate-y. Instead, we get this PvP-focused thing that no one seems to understand. I don't get game developers sometimes. Just make Black Flag its own thing, and you'll sell MILLIONS of copies! **– Roberto Baez, San Diego, CA**

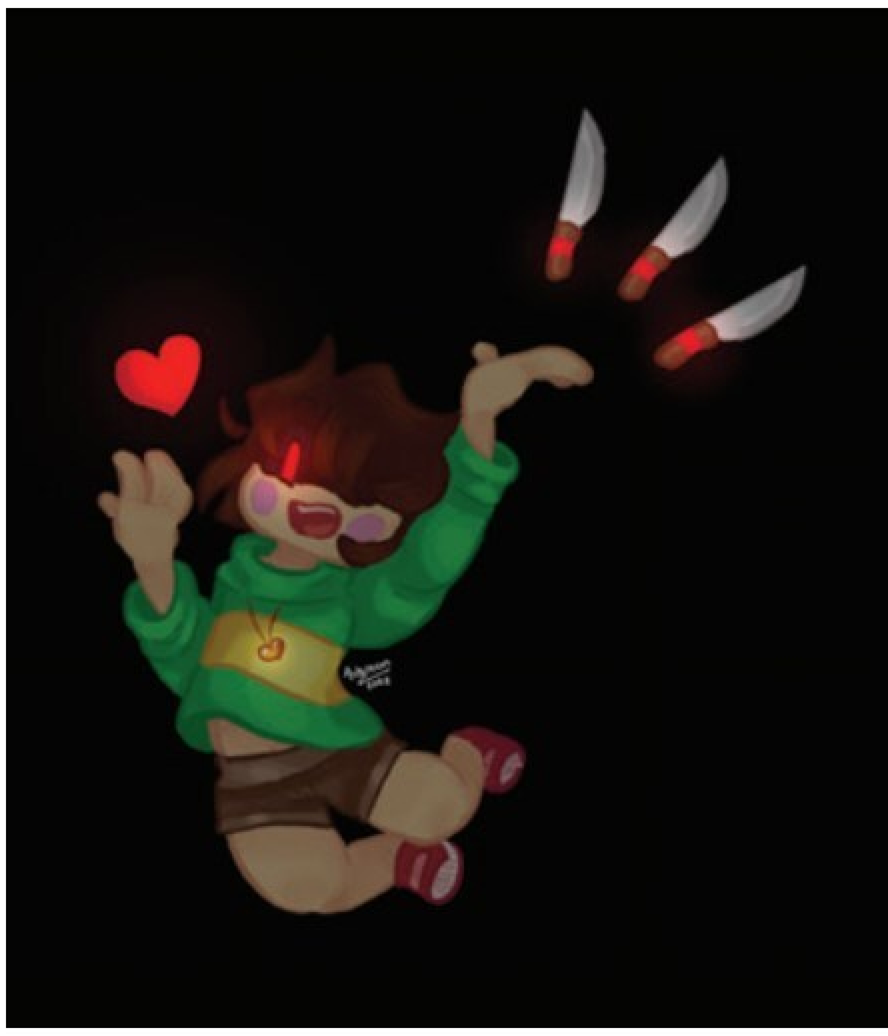
I know Ubisoft gets a lot of flak for various things (like the NFT debacle, for example), but they also make intelligent decisions that don't get the respect they deserve. Delaying Skull and Bones indefinitely to make it great is one of those decisions that not many development studios often make. What happens instead? We get unfinished games at launch that receive numerous patches and changes. I thought Skull and Bones looked great years ago, and the significant delay and rework have only piqued my interest more. It's a day one play for me. **– S. Smyly via email**

↳ ***Skull and Bones is showing tremendous promise and looks to deliver plenty of depth with its gorgeous naval battles. We like where Roberto's head is at in wanting another Black Flag game. If Skull and Bones is a smash hit, maybe Ubisoft will invest in more pirate experiences. Give us Black Flag 2 (or a new I.P. with the same gameplay), and perhaps even snatch up the Pirates of the Caribbean license to sync up with the new movies rumored to be in development.***

NETFLIX GAMES

The world of games is weird right now. I recently caught wind that my Netflix subscription gives me access to a bunch of video games. I figured they'd all be playable on a T.V. remote like Solitaire or a point-and-click adventure, but that isn't the case. These are legitimate mobile games from big development teams, and Netflix publishes them! I loved Subset Games' Into the Breach on Switch, but the new Netflix-published Advanced Edition is even better on mobile. Netflix is also publishing Oxenfree 2. I'm not complaining at all, but I didn't expect to have great games as a part of my Netflix subscription. **– Owen Rand via email**

↳ *A subscription giving you more bang for your buck is a good thing! Netflix Games is just getting off the ground and will hopefully continue delivering titles based on the platform's T.V. shows and movies, like* Stranger Things. *Netflix acquiring key game developers (and some of their titles) helps flesh out the service with unique experiences. We could see Night School Studio taking a shot at making a* Stranger Things *game in the future (in fact, it worked on one in the past that was canceled). We'd also like to see a big triple-A studio make an official* Squid Game *title. Roblox is home to many* Squid Game *copycats showing just how much fun that show's challenges can be in the game space.*



Reader art submission: Aubrey Madrid, age 14

GAME OF THE YEAR?

With delays hitting Starfield, Redfall, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild 2, and Forspoken, is the game of the year race between just Elden Ring and God of War Ragnarök? I can't recall a lighter year in terms of triple-A experiences. **– Shaun Fry via email**

↳ *You are correct: Elden Ring is currently the game to beat, and God of War Ragnarök looks amazing (read our exclusive look at the game on page 32). That doesn't mean it's just a two-horse race – especially since Ragnarök isn't actually out yet; we don't know if it's good. The year has already delivered dozens of fantastic games, like Horizon Forbidden West, Norco, Neon White, Tunic, and Tiny Tina's Wonderlands. We feel the award season will be as exciting as years past. To see just how great 2022 has been for new releases, check out* Game Informer's *Top Scoring Games of 2022 article online.*

IS THE BACKBONE WORTH IT?

I often see news stories and ads for the Backbone accessory that turns my phone into a PlayStation 5 or Xbox Series X, but I never see or hear of anyone using them. Are these controllers good? Do they deliver console-level gaming on my iPhone? I am interested in getting one, but I want to hear if the pricey investment is worth it. Thanks in advance for your feedback! **– Devon Waddingham, London, England**

↳ *The Backbone is worth the investment. Many of us at* Game Informer *either actively use or have tested the peripheral on mobile and find it nearly identical to playing on console, just on a much smaller screen. It's as close to a portable Xbox as you'll find, with the only major downside being it ties up your phone when gaming – meaning no aimless Twitter surfing when on loading screens. We still want Microsoft to make a proper handheld Xbox, but the Backbone controller is a great alternative for mobile games that play better with a controller, or for remote or Cloud play of console titles. The PlayStation-themed version just released, and it's equally great; check out our recommendation on page 31.*

BRING BACK A RACING CLASSIC

Today, games based on vehicles are pretty amazing. Forza Horizon, Grand Theft Auto, Need for Speed, and so many others have pushed the lines of what a great racing game should be. However, one game that pushed racing games further than they had ever been was a game released 22 years ago. It was a launch title for the PS2 and gave gamers over 12 miles (6 square miles per map) to traverse freely. That game was Smuggler's Run. Not a lot is said about this awesome game, or its revolutionary place in history.

[In Smugger's Run], there were a set amount of cars in the world, and no matter where you were on the huge map, those cars were always going to be making their pre-determined loop. Their loop was several miles and would continue until the player blew up the car. This immersion adds depth to the game world because you know that other vehicles are acting independently of your car, regardless of where you are. In games today, you only need to venture a few hundred feet before A.I.-controlled cars or people just disappear.

It is like you are in a fake world, with the only REAL person being yourself. I'm surprised more games have not taken advantage of this system, but here we are, 22 years later, and Smuggler's Run is still far superior, at least in some ways, to most every game that treats all A.I. cars as expendable. **– Console Purist via email**

↳ *Overshadowed by Grand Theft Auto and Rockstar Games' other blockbuster titles of the time, Smuggler's Run likely didn't get the respect it deserved. The series' "living-world" concept is something we'd love to see come back in the racing space. Will we ever see Smuggler's Run return? We have our doubts, but Rockstar still holds a candle for this series, as Grand Theft Auto Online recently received a Smuggler's Run expansion.*

↘

Join the conversation

Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

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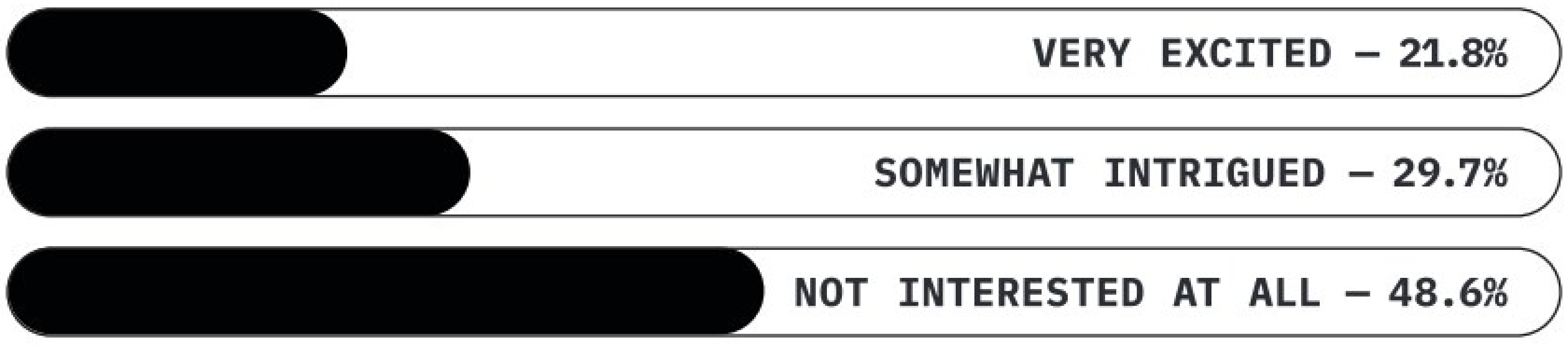
Reader art submission: Matt Anelli

Poll:

How excited are you for PlayStation VR2?



Poll conducted on Twitter

PATH OF TITANS

I don't often see press coverage for games like Path of Titans. It's a smaller-scale MMO that tries to deliver a realistic wildlife experience where players control dinosaurs. I adore the game and think it deserves to be in the spotlight. It was released on PC two years ago and recently made its debut on Xbox through the preview program. The game is still buggy and far from complete, but the small development team has made significant gains recently. It's worth a look for people who want something different. **– Sydney Waterson, Fryeburg, ME**

↳ ***We spent a little time with Path of Titans, and like where it's going with the progression system and simplicity of play when raising a dinosaur from hatching to adult. As you pointed out, the experience is a bit rough, and finding servers with dedicated players can be challenging. For PC players, we recommend checking out The Isle, another dinosaur-based MMO experience. It's a bit older yet but has a thriving community and nicely balanced survival gameplay.***

Soundoff:

Best Boss Ever

From Metal Gear Solid's Psycho Mantis to God of War's Zeus, what video game boss will you remember forever? We asked our Discord audience, and they rattled off a bunch of memorable fights. Here are their responses:

While not my favorite boss (From Software games take most of the top spots), my most memorable will always be the final boss of Yoshi's Island. It was the first game I finished on my own as a kid and cemented my love for overcoming adversity in games. Also, a giant towering Baby Bowser is terrifying. **– Adam**

For me, it's a moment of triumph: I remember my first playthrough of Final Fantasy X on PlayStation 2 and getting to Seymour in the mountains. I struggled for a long while, and that moment of finally getting past his strategy of instantly killing my party was so satisfying. **– Kody Gipson**

Mine was the main path final boss of Sekiro. It felt like the culmination of everything I learned playing that game. It still took me a lot of tries, but everything seemed to slow down the one time I made it through. The struggle made the feeling of victory the most rewarding. **– Joodonkadonk**

In The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker, Link unleashes a surprisingly violent sword strike against Ganondorf, ensuring he won't threaten the world again. The intensity of this moment, coupled with Zelda teaming up with Link in the battle, make it my all-time favorite boss battle. **– Andrew Reiner**

AGING HEROES

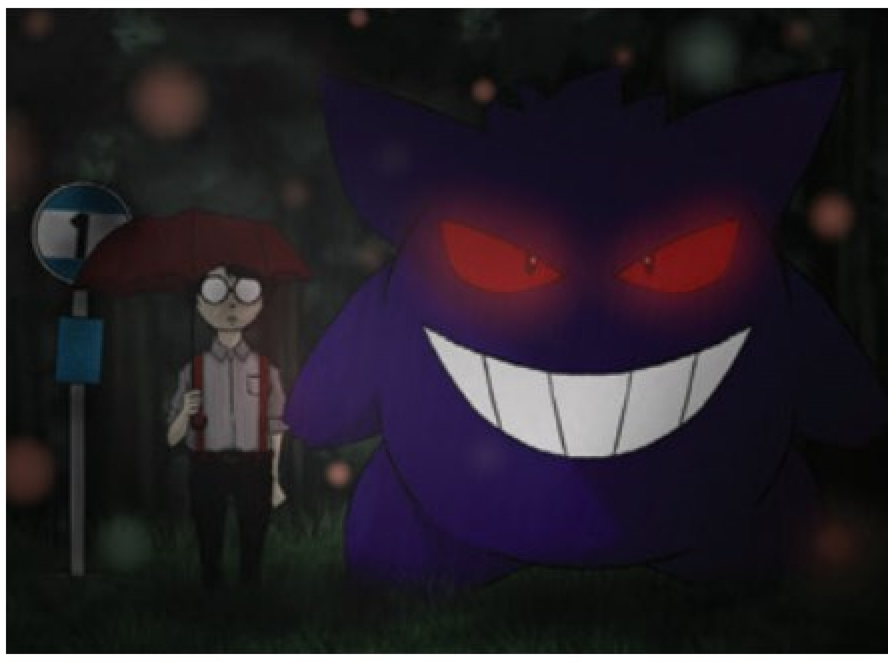
Nothing is forever. Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny are no longer the household names they were. The former is still a prominent figure within Disney's empire but barely has a pulse in shows or movies. The Muppets also don't command attention. Do you think the same thing will happen in the video-game space? **– Cam Gomez via email**

↳ ***Mario and Sonic are two of gaming's oldest icons – perhaps even the Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny equivalent – and are just as popular now as they were back in the day. We don't see their star power fading any time soon. But what of Pac-Man? Gaming's first star is known more as a nostalgic shape than as an iconic character.***

FAST-FOOD GAMES

Remember when Burger King sold a handful of different Xbox 360 games based on its brand? I purchased them all and had fun sneaking around as The King and racing in karts for burgers. I sometimes reflect on that strange occurrence when I'm in a fast-food chain's drive-thru. Now that many games are free to play, you'd think more fast-food establishments would give them away. Rather than being on disc, you'd get the game as a code to enter in the PlayStation 5 store. Do you think this could happen? **– Steven M. via email**

↳ ***This is a fantastic idea that McDonald's and Burger King should adapt. The game people receive doesn't have to be exclusive to the fast-food chain. The code could simply unlock McDonald's or Burger King-themed items within an established title, like Fortnite or Fall Guys. The developer benefits from more people downloading the game.***



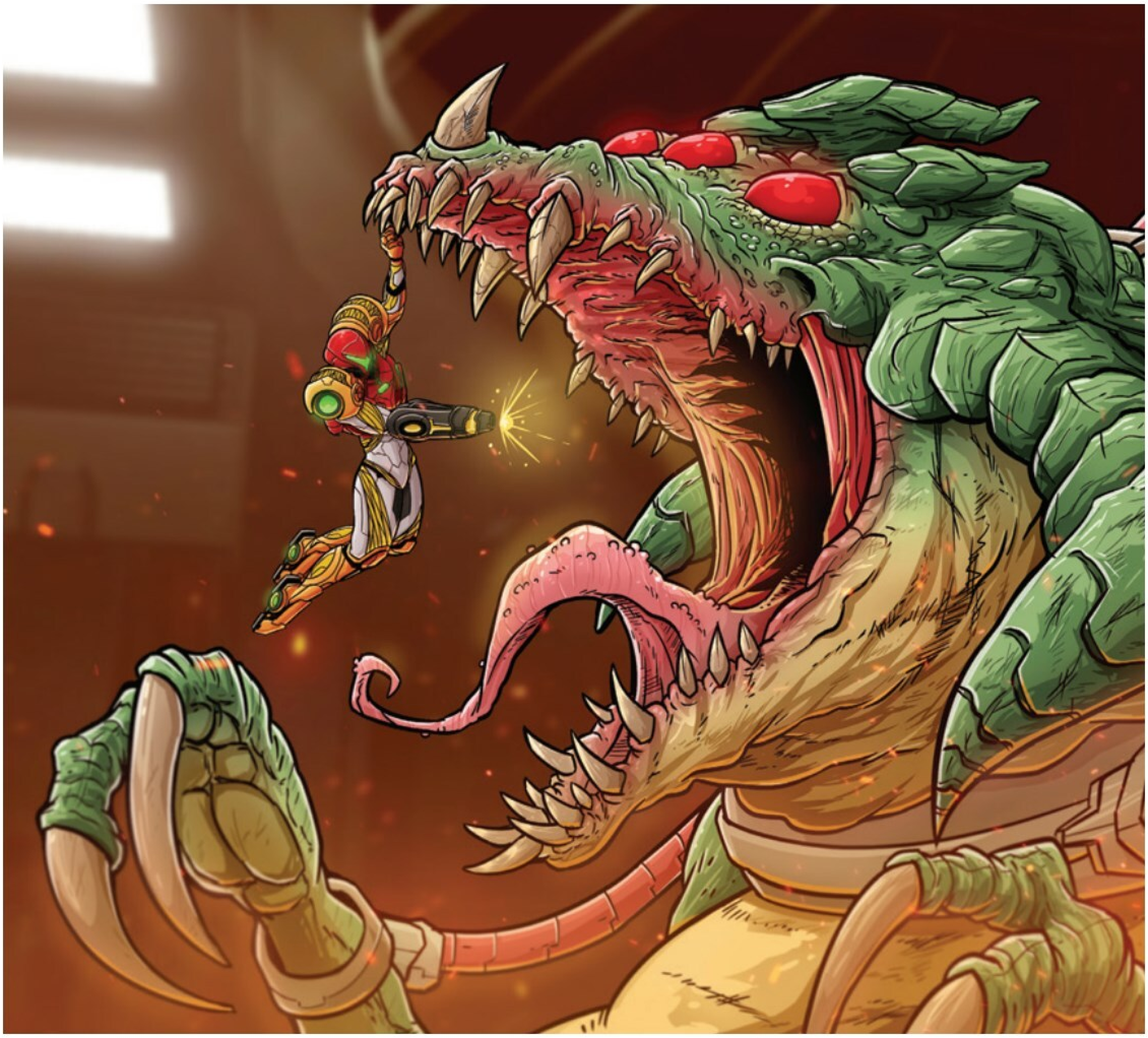
Reader art submission: Donny Morrison

Reader art submission:
Annabella Davis, age 11

ANIMAL GAMES

When I was young, most games featured anthropomorphic lead characters. Mario seemed to be the exception to a bunch of animals that wore human clothing and spoke English. Now, the game industry seems to be shifting to mostly human lead characters, with the animal leads acting like legitimate animals. Stray is the perfect example of how to do it. Maneater, while way over the top, also gets this idea across. The animal kingdom is overflowing with unique perspectives developers can use for a game. I hope this trend continues! **– Jenna Williams-Hetchv, Green Bay, WI**

↳ ***Stray making you think like a cat is surprisingly effective in changing what we expect from a video game protagonist. We should also point out that PlayStation 2's Mister Mosquito was a hell of a blood-sucking simulator and should get a remaster following Stray's success. If you are looking to play as a fox, three enjoyable games were released recently: The first is Spirit of the North, an adventure into the wilderness that shows the beauty of Iceland yet doesn't have a story to tell. The second is Endling: Extinction is Forever, a tense side-scrolling action game where you must care for a fox's pups. The third is Tunic, one of our highest scoring games of 2022 so far! Now we just need a developer to give us a hippopotamus game, one of nature's most misunderstood animals.*** ■



Reader art winner: Jeremy Clark

↘
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THE RETURN OF EVO

The global stage of fighting games

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

"USA, USA, USA," thousands of people fervently chant.

It's 2:00 a.m. I'm exhausted, and many around me are delirious. In front of us, two of the world's best players are competing in Dragon Ball FighterZ. Nitro, the number-one-ranking American player, is squaring off against Yasha, one of France's best competitors.

An ocean of fans fills the convention center, their cheers like waves swelling and crashing with every new movement on the screen. We're watching the Winners Final, and whoever wins this fight competes in the Grand Finals for thousands of dollars and the world champion title.

This is the Evolution Championship Series, better known as EVO, the world's largest fighting game competition.

Minutes earlier, it felt clear Yasha would secure an early victory via a 2-0 lead; however, Nitro had now miraculously tied the game. With the possibility of a reverse sweep, people can barely stay in their seats. A few rows away, a group of French fans screams their lungs out, waving their nation's flag overhead. The broadcast commentators are calling Nitro the "American Hero."

I feel like I'm at the Olympics.

After all, players spend months or even years training for EVO. Unlike most sporting events, anyone can compete at EVO if they pay the entry fee; everyone has a chance to win if they're skilled enough. And that's why I can't look away. Behind my heavy, sleep-deprived eyes, my imagination races at the thought of competing next year. I'm watching a raw, distilled form of competition, and it's intoxicating.

In a dramatic final round, Nitro methodically blocks incoming attacks and slowly dismantles Yasha's three-character team. The 20-year-old American finally eliminates the French juggernaut, and the crowd explodes. Yasha stares blankly at the screen while his biggest supporters mourn his defeat just behind him. Nitro jumps out of his seat, screaming and celebrating with the crowd. He did what no one thought he could: the reverse sweep.

I can't help but think this is a once-in-a-lifetime moment, but I'm attending EVO for the first time and little do I know, I'll experience this same euphoria night after night for the rest of my stay. It's magical, and it's why EVO exists.

"The opportunity for community growth is probably higher in the next three years than it has been in the entire history of competitive fighting games," Rick Thiher, EVO's new general manager, plainly states.

With upcoming releases like Street Fighter 6, a teased sequel to Tekken, and highly anticipated titles like Riot Games' Project L, there are many eyes on the fighting game community. Subsequently, there's pressure to deliver a world-class event.

Despite this year's success, it hasn't been an easy road after a two-year hiatus. In 2020, then-EVO co-founder and CEO Joey Cuellar was accused of sexual misconduct, and EVO Online was cancelled. The showrunners have had to navigate increased costs and delayed pipelines like the rest of the world, but the pandemic has also brought forth unforeseen hurdles.

"[It's been] exceptionally challenging," Thiher says.

"There's a variety of staff in fighting games – that have become the infrastructure for our conventions and tournaments – that are part-time hobbyists," he continues. "They're just dedicated attendees who come through to run brackets and help us run the productions. In two and a half years away from live events, they've gotten new jobs, started families, or have other hobbies. So having to either find replacements for them or to get them reignited with the culture that we spend a lot of our time in is a new wrinkle in putting events together that I hadn't otherwise experienced."

While the event is understaffed, as evidenced by its perpetually late schedule, it doesn't seem like folks mind. Everyone I've interacted with is happy to be here, surrounded by a like-minded community.

But Thiher wants to do better. He wants the show to continue evolving. That evolution is likely helped by EVO's new owner: Sony, which bought the tournament in 2021.

"We have companies involved that are interested in us as a culture and not just as a product," Thiher says. "They're giving us the resources to actually experiment with what this event is, and what the brand can do. That's going to be phenomenal for finding out not only how EVO can deliver on its purpose, but how that purpose can grow."

Regardless of how the organizers overcome future hurdles, the thousands of fans roaring in the night make it clear: EVO is the global stage of fighting games, and its organizers know how to put on one hell of a show. ■

EVO
CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES
A

WINNER
T70
NICOLAS
ADVANCES TO
WINNERS FINAL

OPINION

A SECOND CHANCE AT HISTORY

How Nintendo Switch Online made me stop pining for Virtual Console

BY BRIAN SHEA

WHEN NINTENDO INTRODUCED the Switch Online classic games catalog featuring NES titles, I lamented the announcement of what I saw as an inferior content delivery system. We were asked to play with a substantially smaller library of games than what we had on Wii or Wii U, and I didn't even have the option to buy those games. Instead, we were given a small library from a single console with no way to carry over entitlements from previous purchases or actually own the classic games I was playing. I felt Nintendo Switch Online was a worse service in every way, even as Nintendo expanded the offerings to include robust NES and SNES libraries.

Then in 2020, something changed. With many of my usual social activities put on hold, I had more free time at home than ever before. I largely spent that time catching up on TV shows, movies, and video games. As part of that, I dove deeper into the classic game offerings on Nintendo Switch Online – after all, I was paying for the whole suite, not just Super Mario World, as my playing habits could have led you to believe. I found a wide range of titles I had never heard of, never played, or completely forgot about from my childhood.

Yes, having access to old favorites like Super Mario Bros. 3, The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past, and Donkey Kong Country is amazing, but I had a surprising amount of fun digging into the games I would never have if I had to pay for each title individually. As someone

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NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
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YOSHI
SUPER MARIO WORLD
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SELECT Button
START Button
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ARCADE CL
Nintendo

who grew up with an SNES, Genesis, and Nintendo 64, those previously unplayed gems largely live in the NES catalog. I played a ton of NES as a kid, but it was never at my house unless someone brought theirs over. I was at the mercy of what games my friends owned. I initially missed out on titles like NES Open Tournament Golf, Rygar, and StarTropics, and I relish the opportunity to go back in time to games like Gradius, Ice Hockey, and Super Dodge Ball – titles I played at friends' houses but never owned. And it also allows me to play SNES games I missed that I always wanted to try (Pilotwings, Donkey Kong Country 3, and Super Punch-Out!!) without having to shell out the extra money.

Then, the experience is made even better by the fact that it adds some extra features. Save states and rewind functionality are pretty standard additions for retro games these days, but Nintendo also added online multiplayer for several titles in the various libraries. However, I most appreciate the special versions of select games Nintendo has added over the years, like a version of Super Mario World with Special World cleared and the various twists that come with that, or a version of Super Metroid with Samus fully upgraded. While there's something to be said about working your way through these games to earn these prestigious unlocks, having access to these right off the bat through these optional special versions is a cool twist on the standard retro game offerings.

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In 2021, Nintendo introduced the Switch Online Expansion Pack, giving players access to N64 and Genesis games, plus premium expansions for games like Splatoon 2, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, and Animal Crossing: New Horizons. While I loved my Genesis back in the day, the Nintendo 64 was the component I was most excited about with this new subscription tier. Unfortunately, it wasn't wholly the experience I was hoping for when it launched. Still, through added availability of the N64 controller for Switch, a continued rollout of new titles to the service, and improved emulation, the Nintendo 64 did the same thing for me that the other catalogs did: It gave me the chance to revisit old favorites and experience games I missed when I was younger.

That's not to say Nintendo Switch Online's classic games catalog is better than the Virtual Consoles of Wii and Wii U in every way. There are many places where it falls well short of the previous official method of playing these classic titles on modern Nintendo hardware. For one, content ownership is something I feel we undervalue in today's world of Netflix and Spotify. Yes, those services deliver excellent bang for your buck, but I can't tell you the number of times I've fired up Netflix to watch something specific, only to find that the show or movie is no longer on the service. At least with movies, TV shows, music, and most game-subscription services, I can purchase the content digitally on modern hardware. In contrast, with retro Nintendo games, my only official option on modern hardware is the route of non-ownership through this subscription service.

On top of that, some of the games (Nintendo 64, in particular) featured shoddy emulation in the Switch Online library. While that could happen regardless of if it's Switch Online or Virtual Console, it's unfortunate that some games don't play as well as they did 25 years ago when the Nintendo 64 library is among the major selling points for the higher-priced Expansion Pack. Thankfully, Nintendo has improved its N64 emulation in the time since the catalog's launch.

I still wish I could own my favorite retro releases, but the breadth of what is offered by Nintendo Switch Online's classic game catalogs has won me over as a former Virtual Console loyalist. Sure, there are still ways to improve Nintendo Switch Online's approach to retro-game offerings, but I'm done pining for the days of Virtual Console. Just as I've sacrificed music and movie ownership in the name of value, convenience, and unprecedented access to a wide array of content, I'm happy to do the same (to an extent) through services like Game Pass, PlayStation Plus, and Nintendo Switch Online.

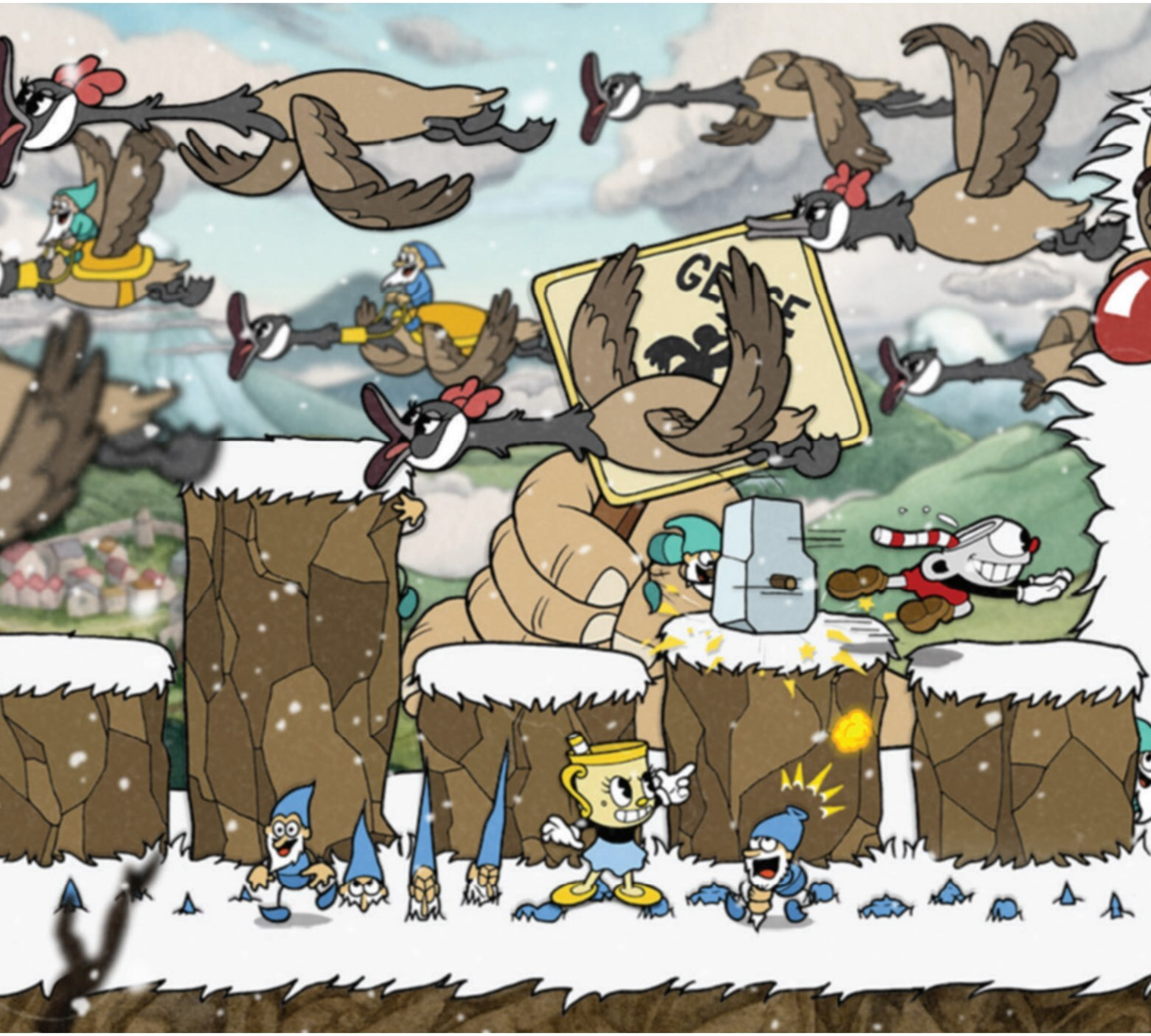
Now, if only we could cut down on the vast number of subscription services, but that's a conversation for another time. ■

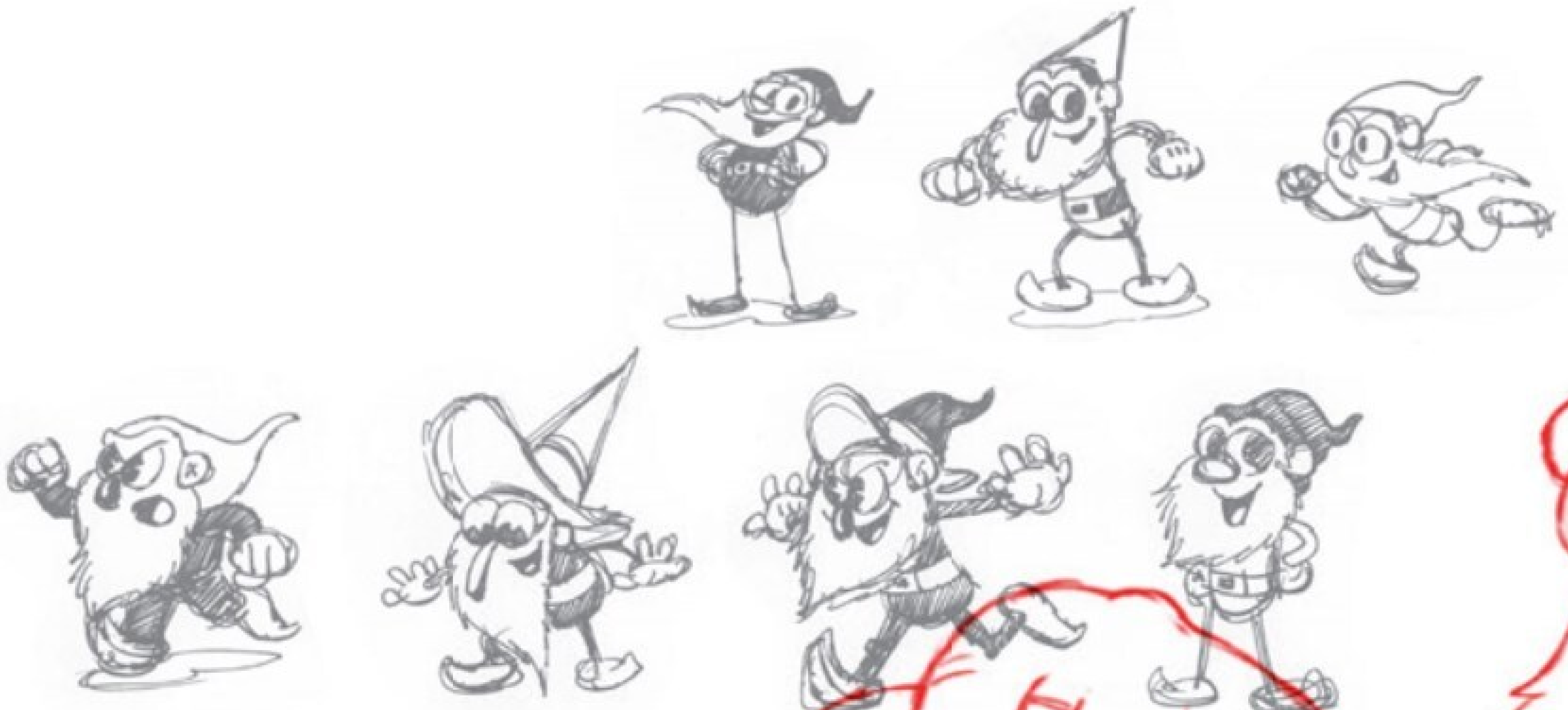
For more Nintendo talk from Brian, be sure to subscribe to All Things Nintendo, a weekly podcast he hosts covering the biggest news and games from the world of Nintendo

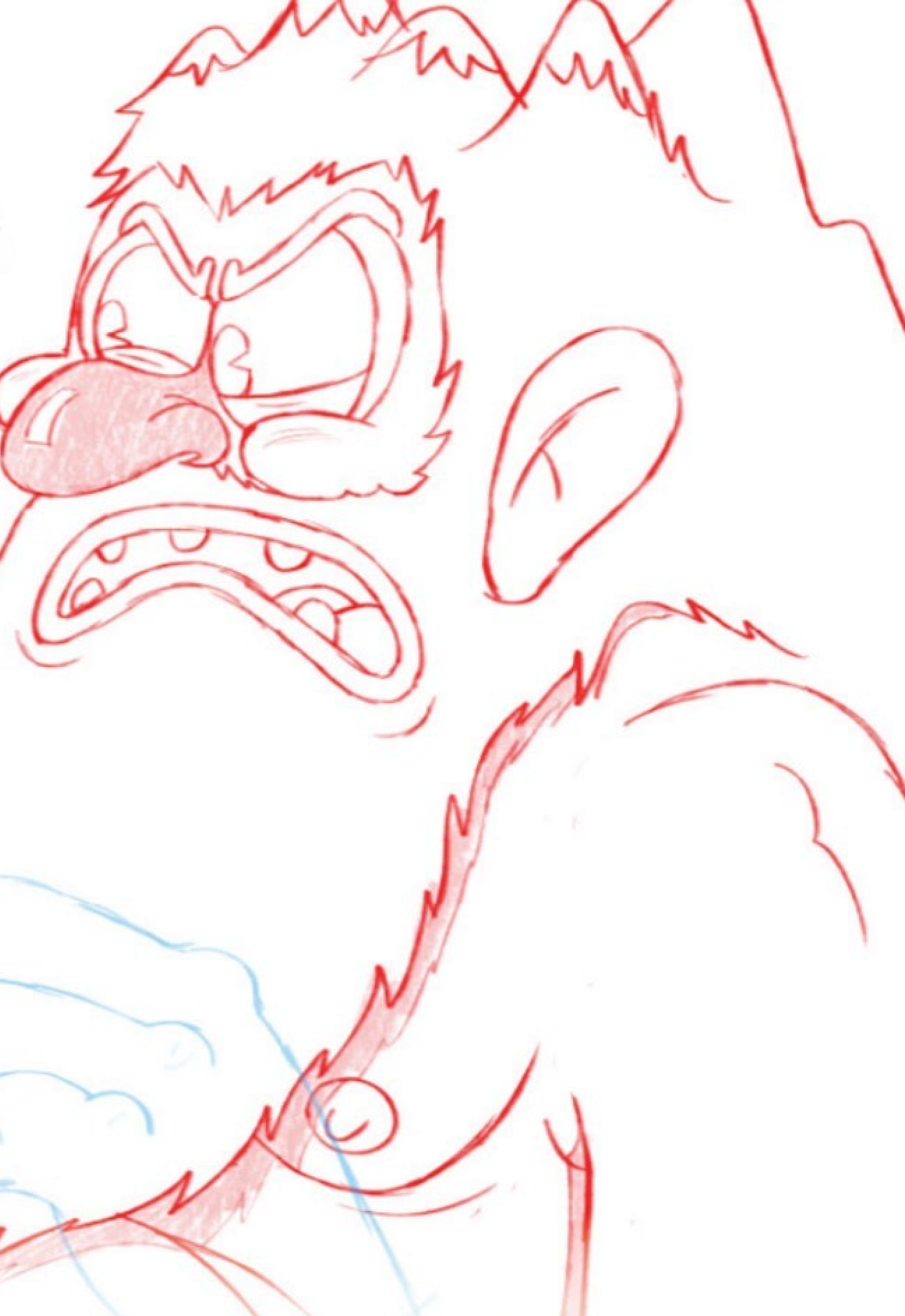
Building a Boss

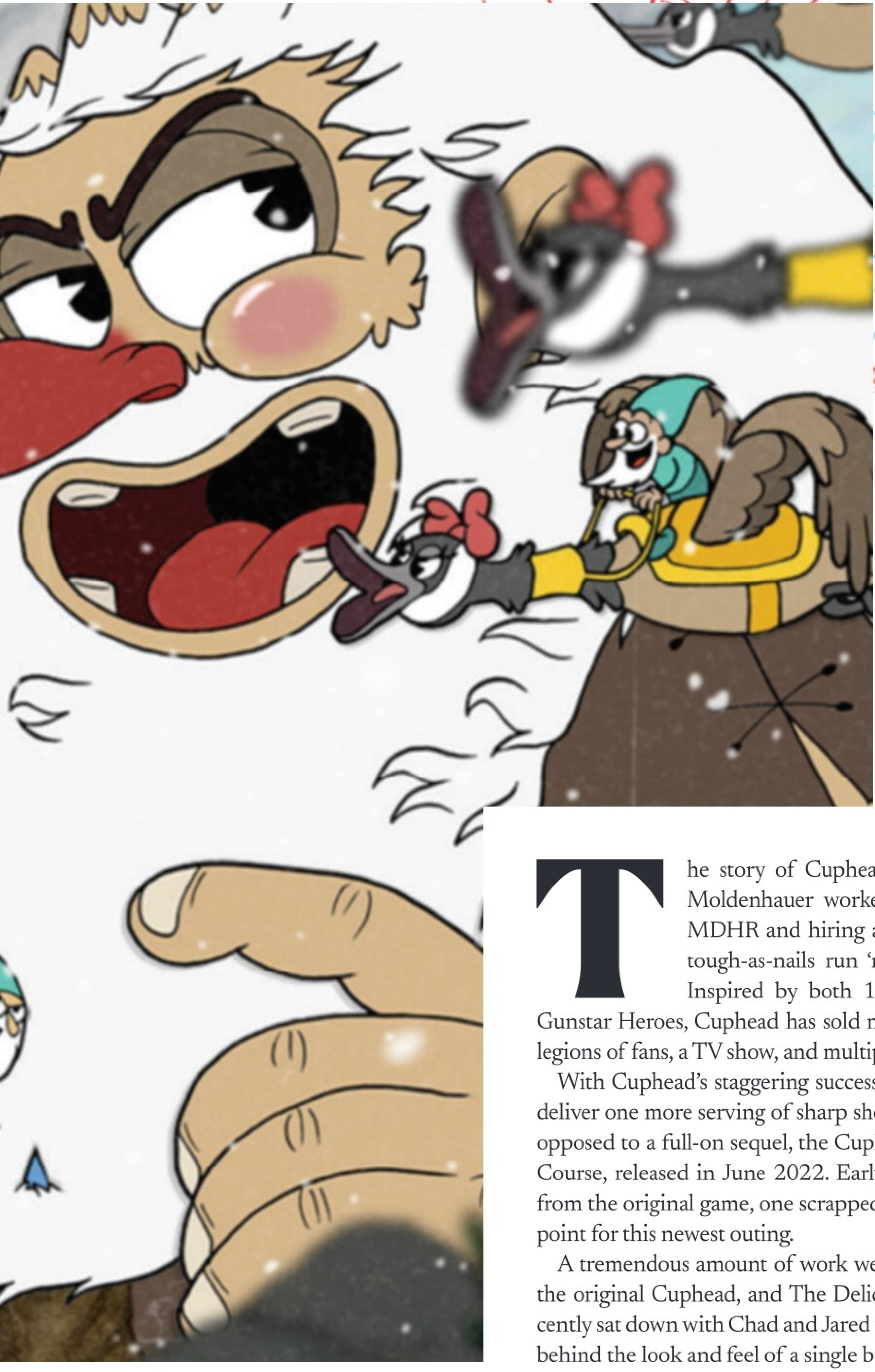
A behind-the-scenes look at Cuphead's colossal challenger

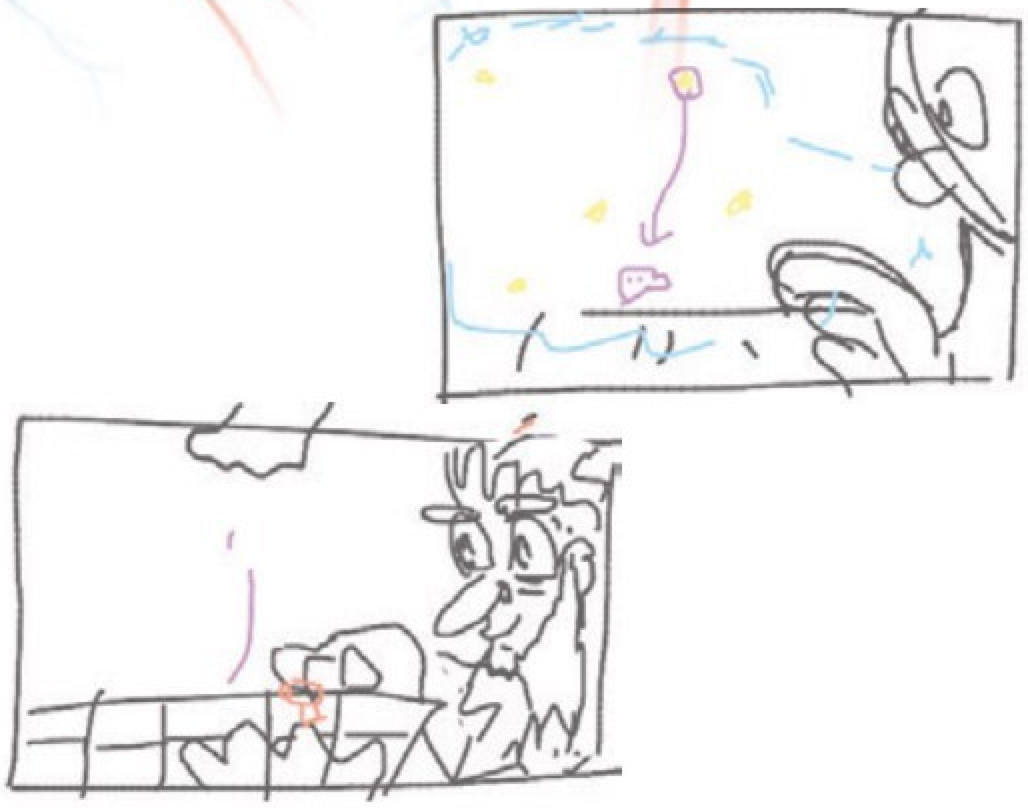
BY BEN BERTOLI







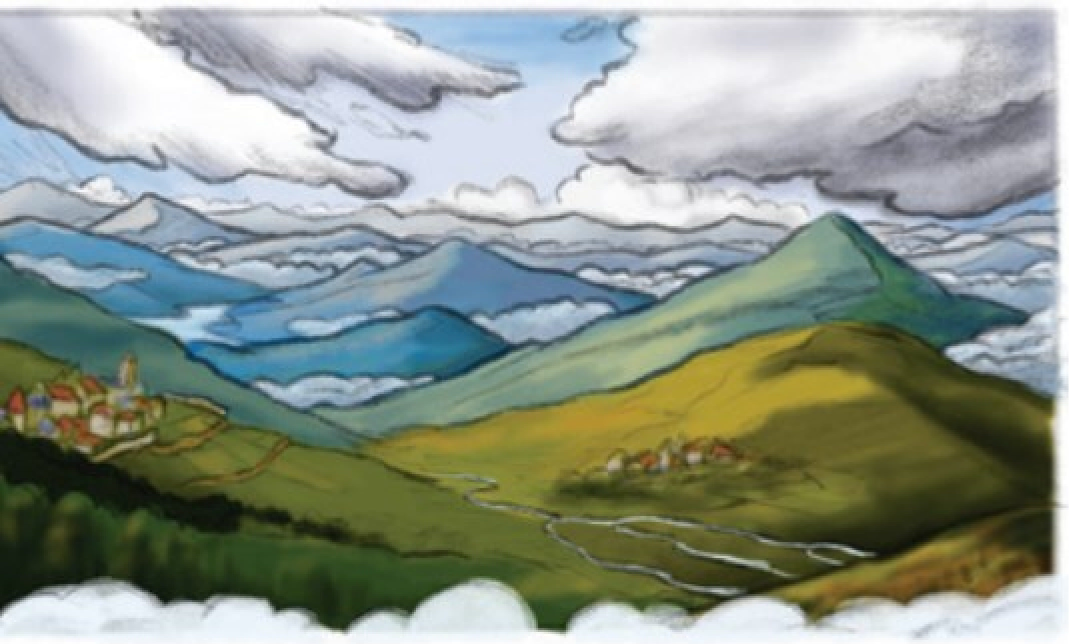


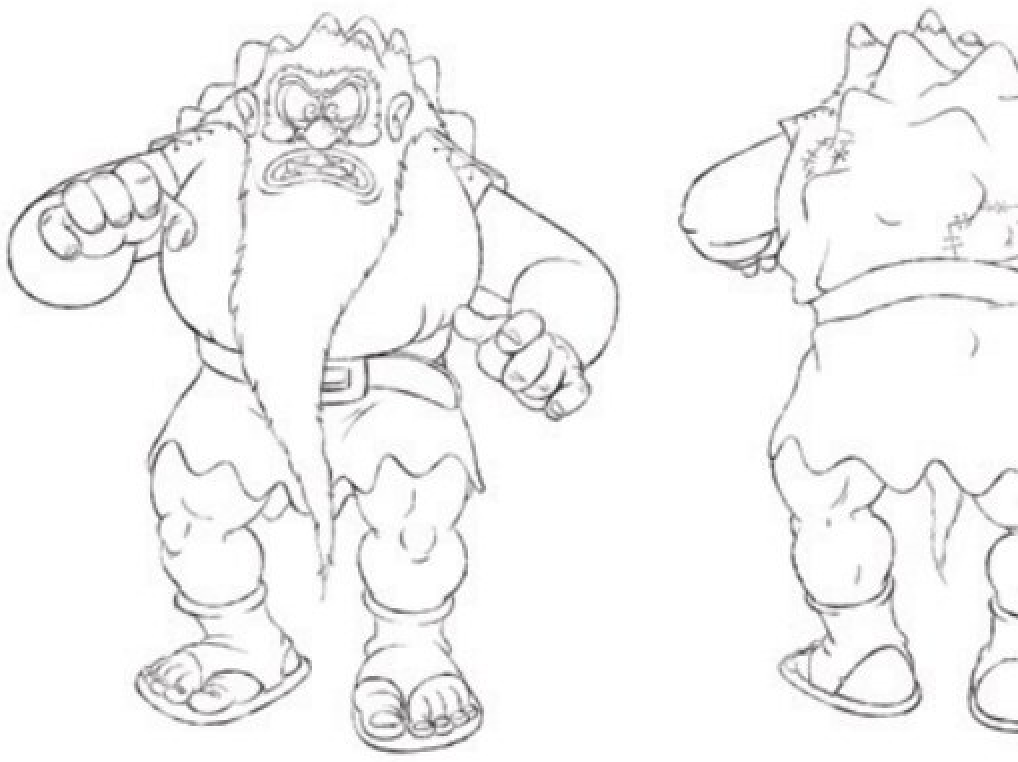


The story of Cuphead is indie gaming legend. Brothers Chad and Jared Moldenhauer worked for years, risking their finances founding Studio MDHR and hiring a host of talented artists and animators to bring their tough-as-nails run 'n' gun game to life. The gamble paid off in spades. Inspired by both 1930s animation and classic games like Contra and Gunstar Heroes, Cuphead has sold more than six million copies, amassing critical acclaim, legions of fans, a TV show, and multiple world records along the way.

With Cuphead's staggering success, it's not too surprising the team at MDHR wanted to deliver one more serving of sharp shooting excitement and aggravation. Opting for DLC as opposed to a full-on sequel, the Cuphead developer set about outlining The Delicious Last Course, released in June 2022. Early in production, MDHR decided that a boss concept from the original game, one scrapped due to time constraints, would be the perfect starting point for this newest outing.

A tremendous amount of work went into designing, testing, and tweaking every boss in the original Cuphead, and The Delicious Last Course was no different. *Game Informer* recently sat down with Chad and Jared to get behind-the-scenes insight on the thought process behind the look and feel of a single boss – a cantankerous giant the size of a mountain.



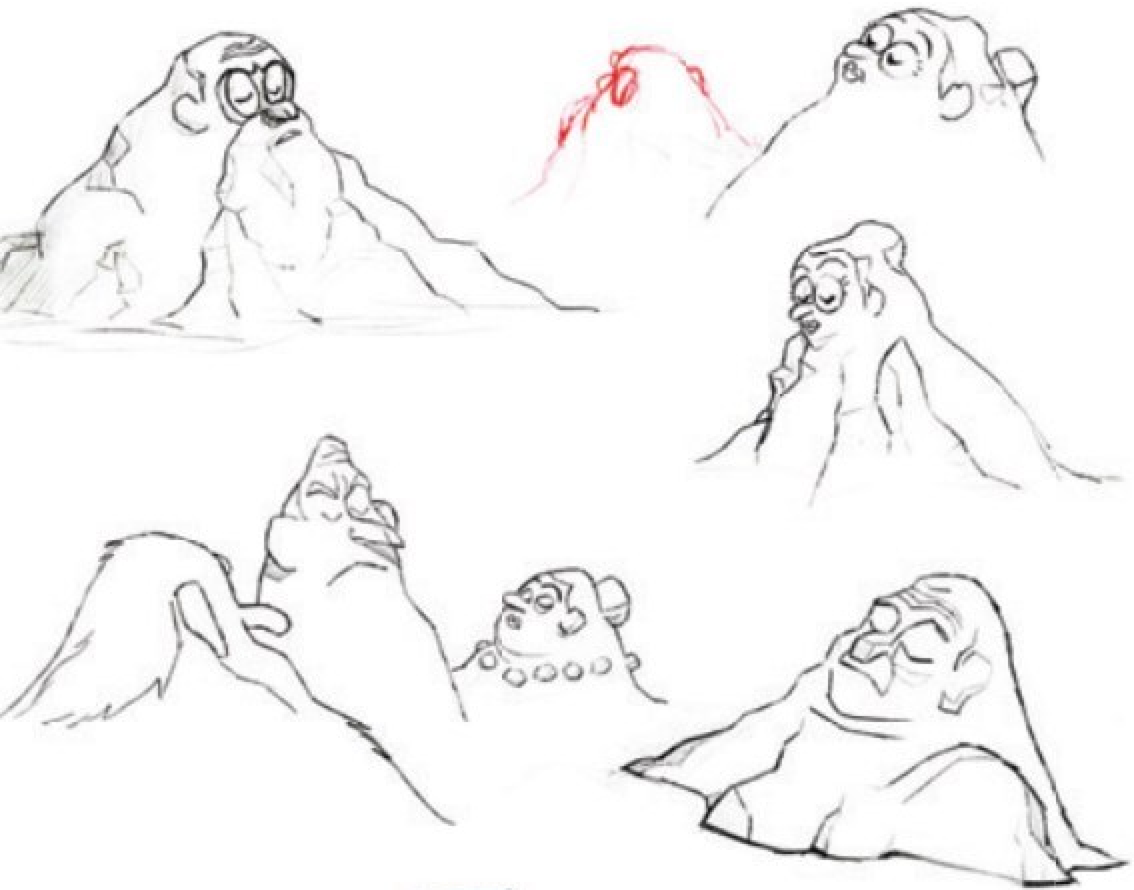


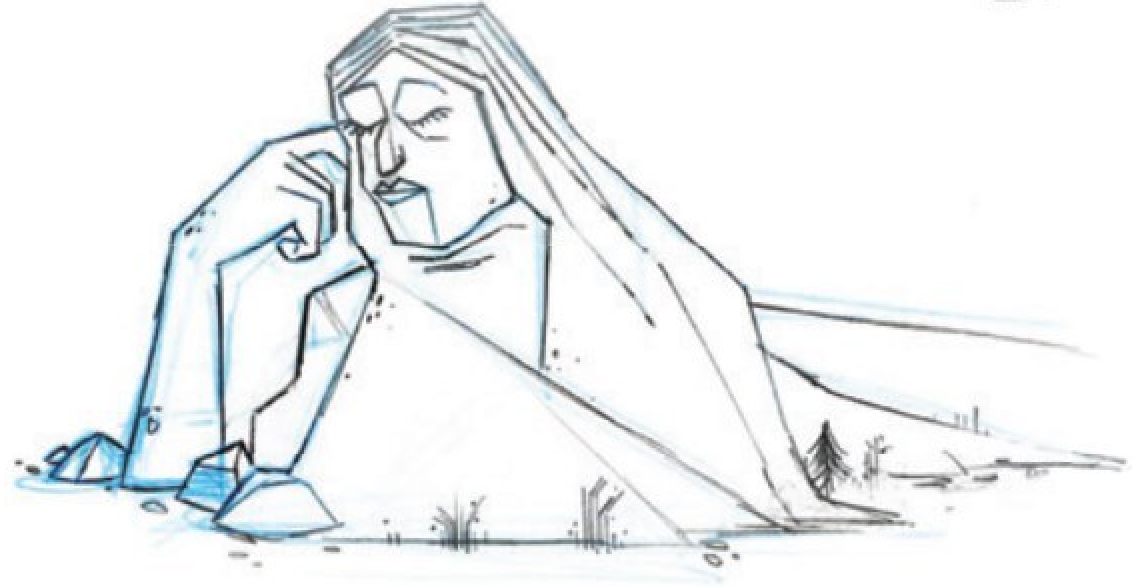
Peak Design

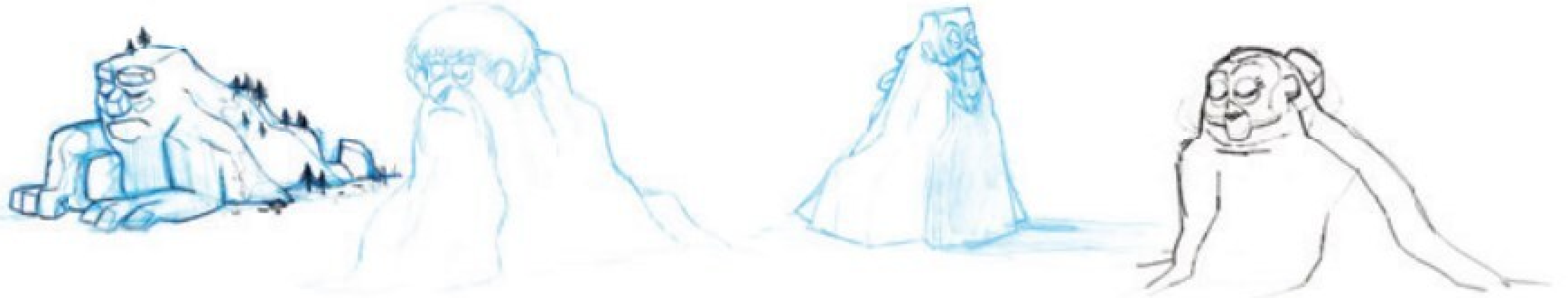
The look and demeanor of Glumstone the Giant, or Old Man Mountain, as he was known internally, is inspired by a smattering of larger-than-life antagonists from 1930s animated shorts. While the giant's enormous stature and many of his mannerisms come from Disney's 1938 Mickey Mouse short *The Brave Little Tailor*, his flowing white beard and scraggly appearance is a direct reference to Fleischer Studios' 1933 classic *The Old Man of the Mountain*, starring the flirtatious Betty Boop. In the cartoon, the titular hermit is portrayed as a feral lunatic, chasing Betty after a shared dance in his mountaintop cave.

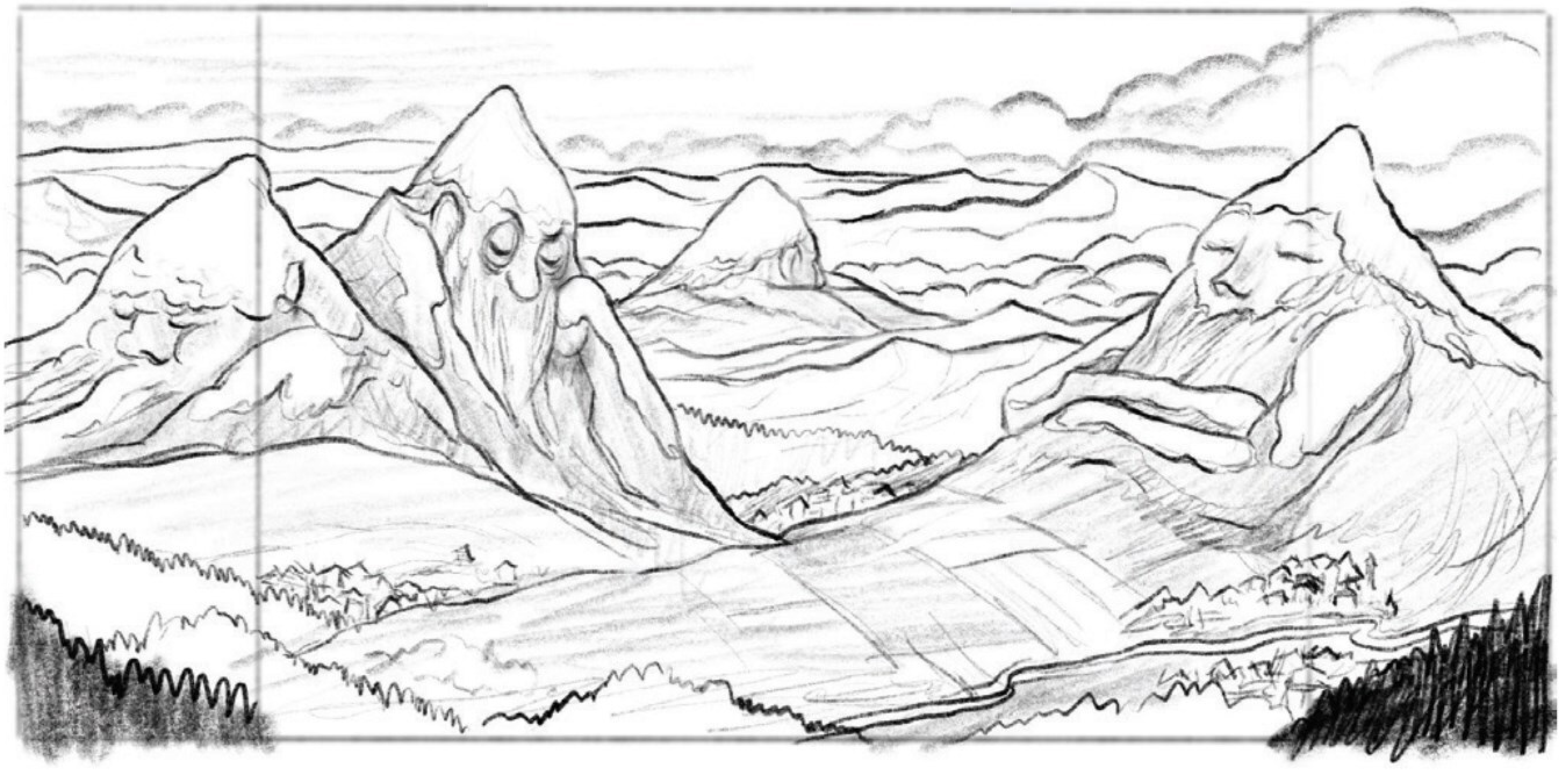
Glumstone's initial character design came together so early that he's in not one but two Cuphead books published before The Delicious Last Course – *The Art of Cuphead* and the middle-grade novel *Cuphead in A Mountain of Trouble*. MDHR floated the idea of adding a never-ceasing swarm of gnomes to the Glumstone mythos early on, and it soon became the driving force behind many of his attacks and environments. Though seemingly annoyed by the gnomes, Glumstone would also work in tandem with the tiny folk, a symbiotic relationship of fairytale proportions.

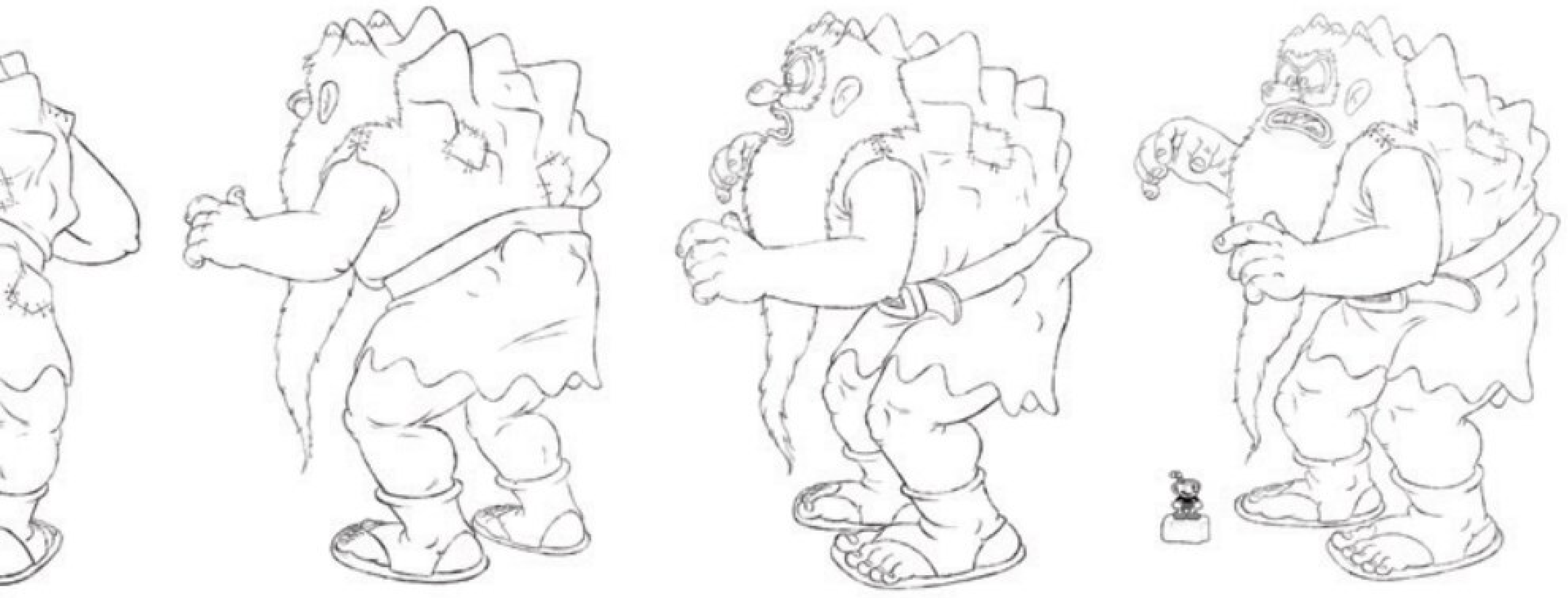
With more and more details falling into place, the Cuphead team began brainstorming the perfect setting for this new hard-hitting throwdown. The first choices included a cloudy mountain peak, a frosty winter landscape, and a treetop gnome village. "The ideas were cool, but it kept everything too close, and it didn't feel like the giant was truly a giant," says Chad. "So then we started going through valleys and more vast looking settings. Once we hit that, it just quickly shifted to this wide open mountainous area, and we threw in that extra lore." The team based the lore in question around the stony faces found on each mountain, adding the implied mythology of a long-slumbering race of colossal beings.

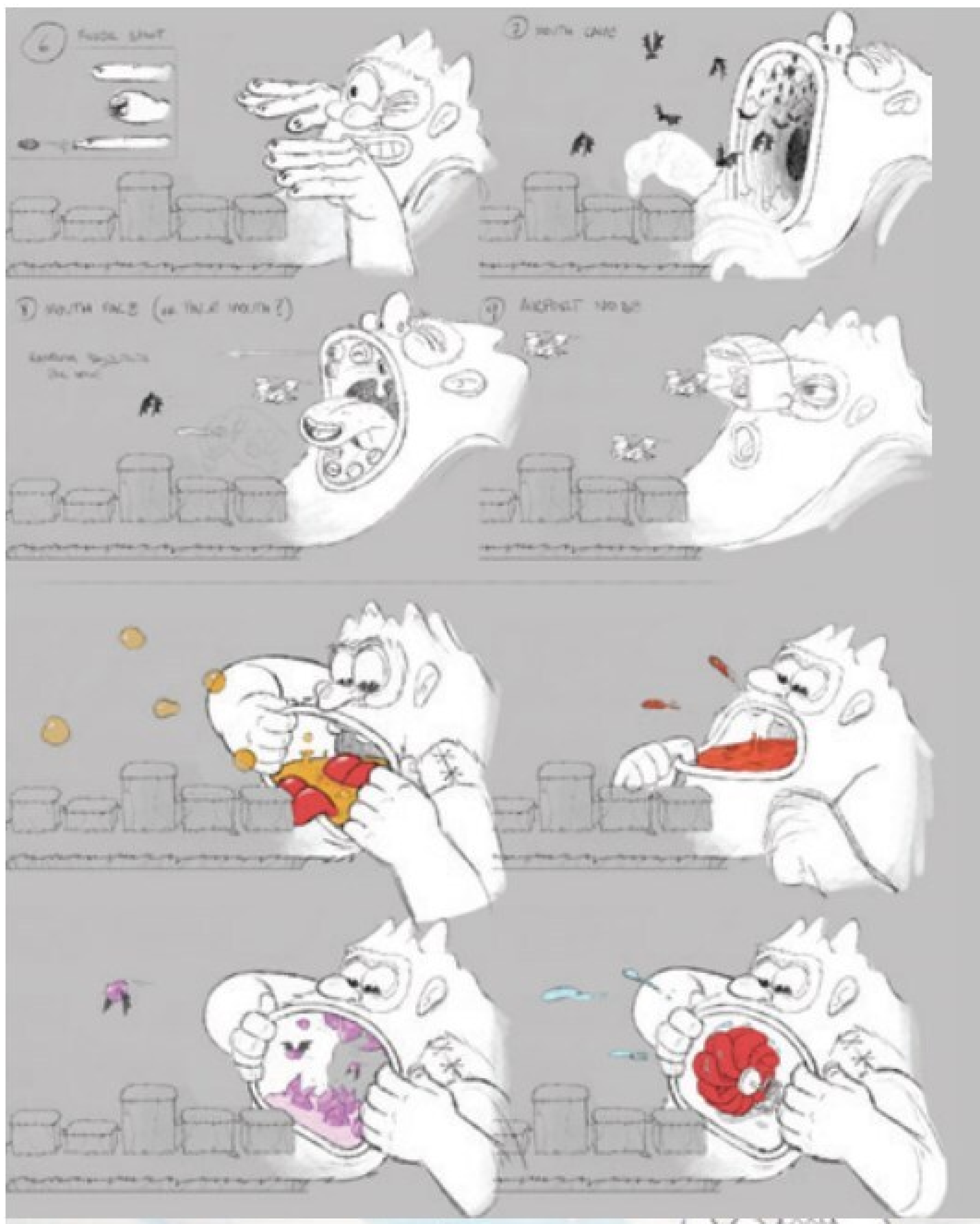


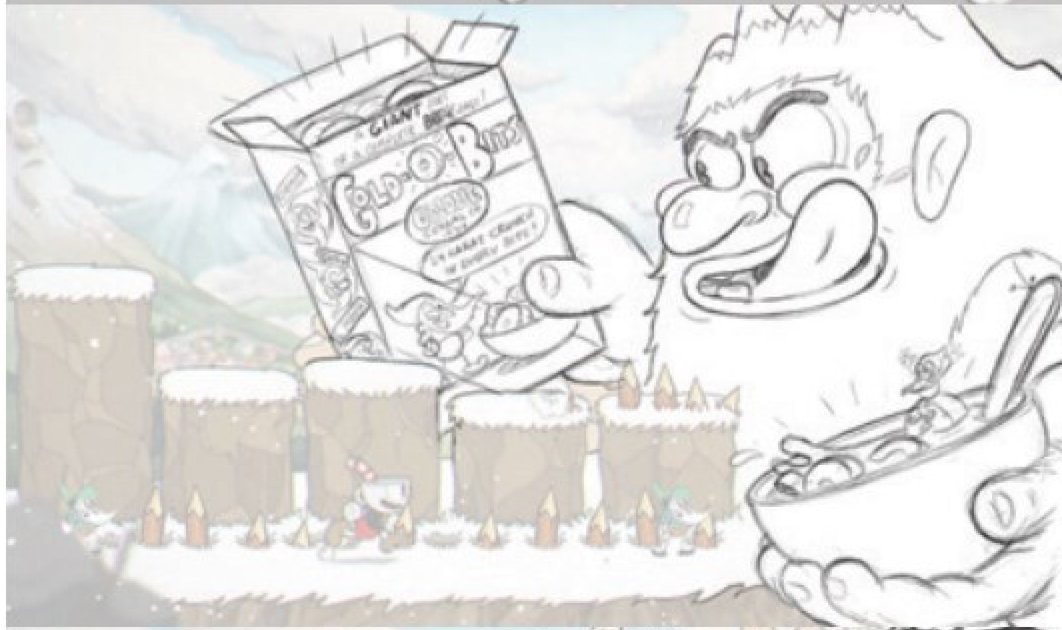


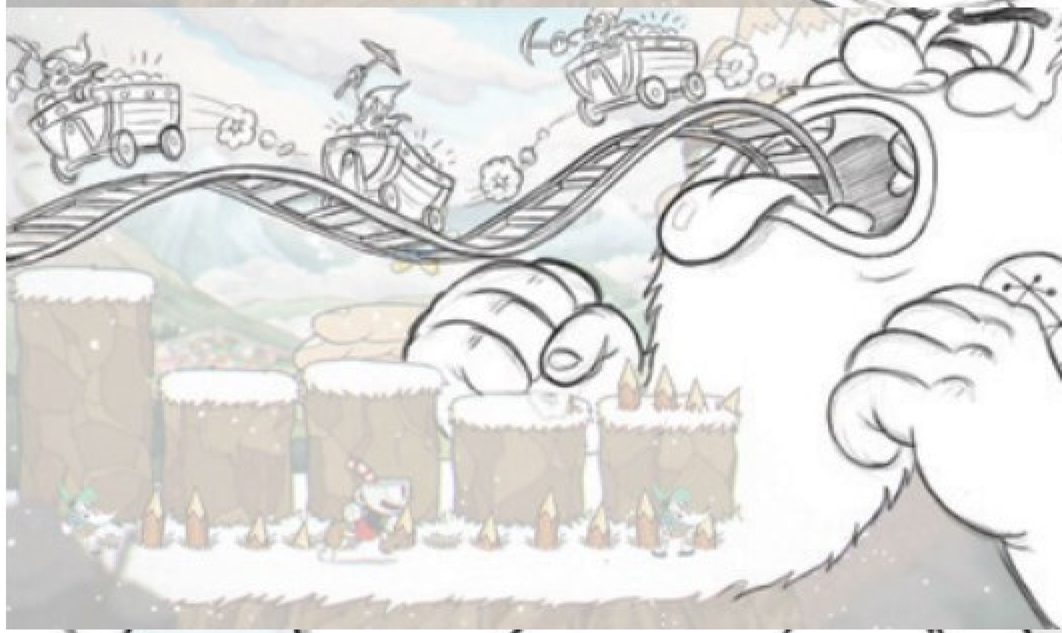












Couldn't Axe for More

With Glumstone's gargantuan face taking up the right side of the screen and an army of gnomes waiting in the wings, the Moldenhauer brothers and their team set about finding just the right balance of amusement and annoyance for the boss' first phase. They proposed, debated, and ultimately shelved many attacks, including an avalanche of gold-flavored cereal bits, gnomes skiing off slopes of unkempt hair, and a minecart rail unfurling from inside Glumstone's gaping maw.

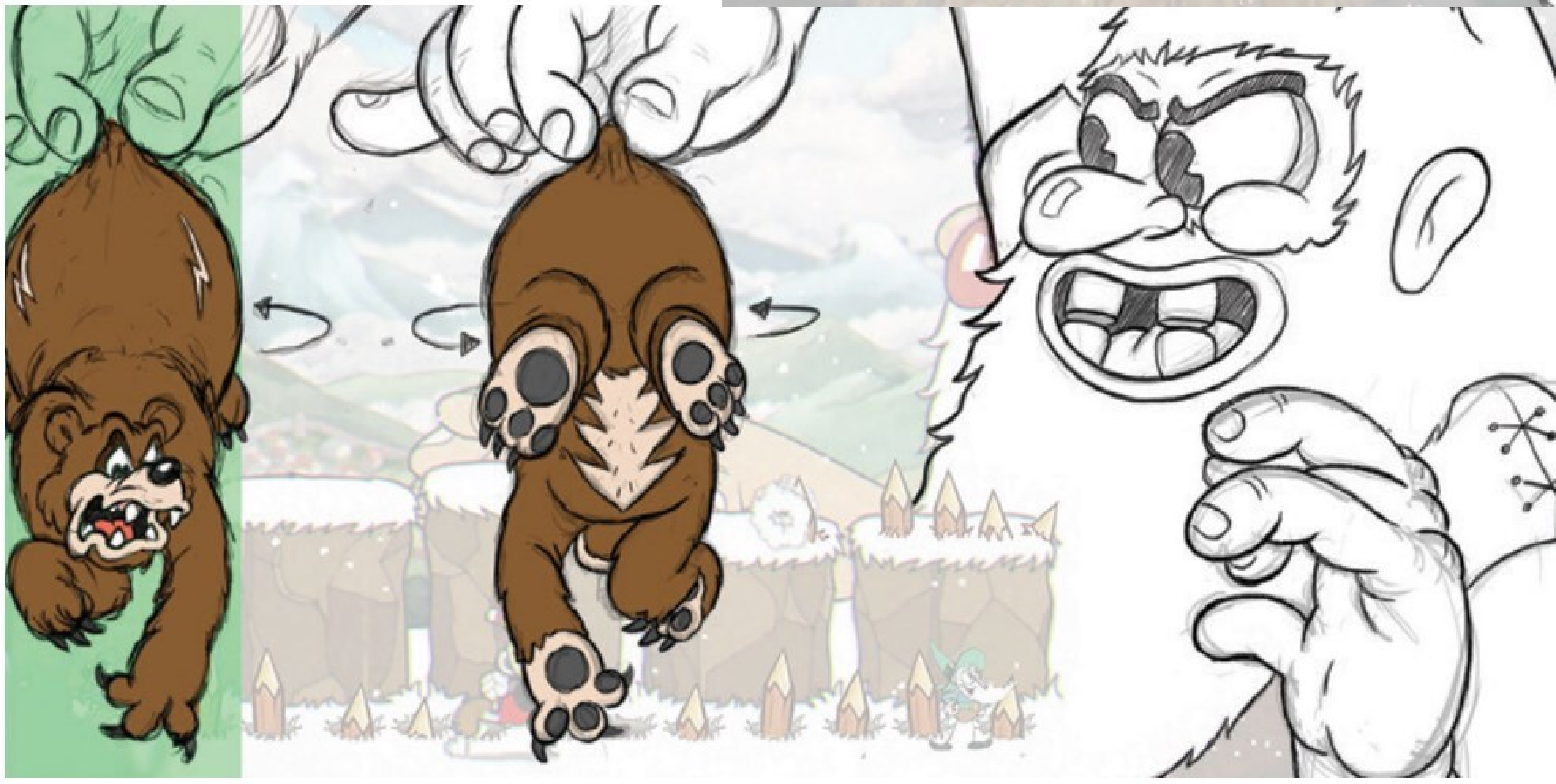
"There's tons of back and forth," Chad says about the design process. "There's really serendipitous times where you start building off of a concept, and every idea that comes up is perfectly linked and has this 'Aha!' moment. But a lot of the time, it's just a battle to get the theme to feel right without going so far away that it all feels disjointed."

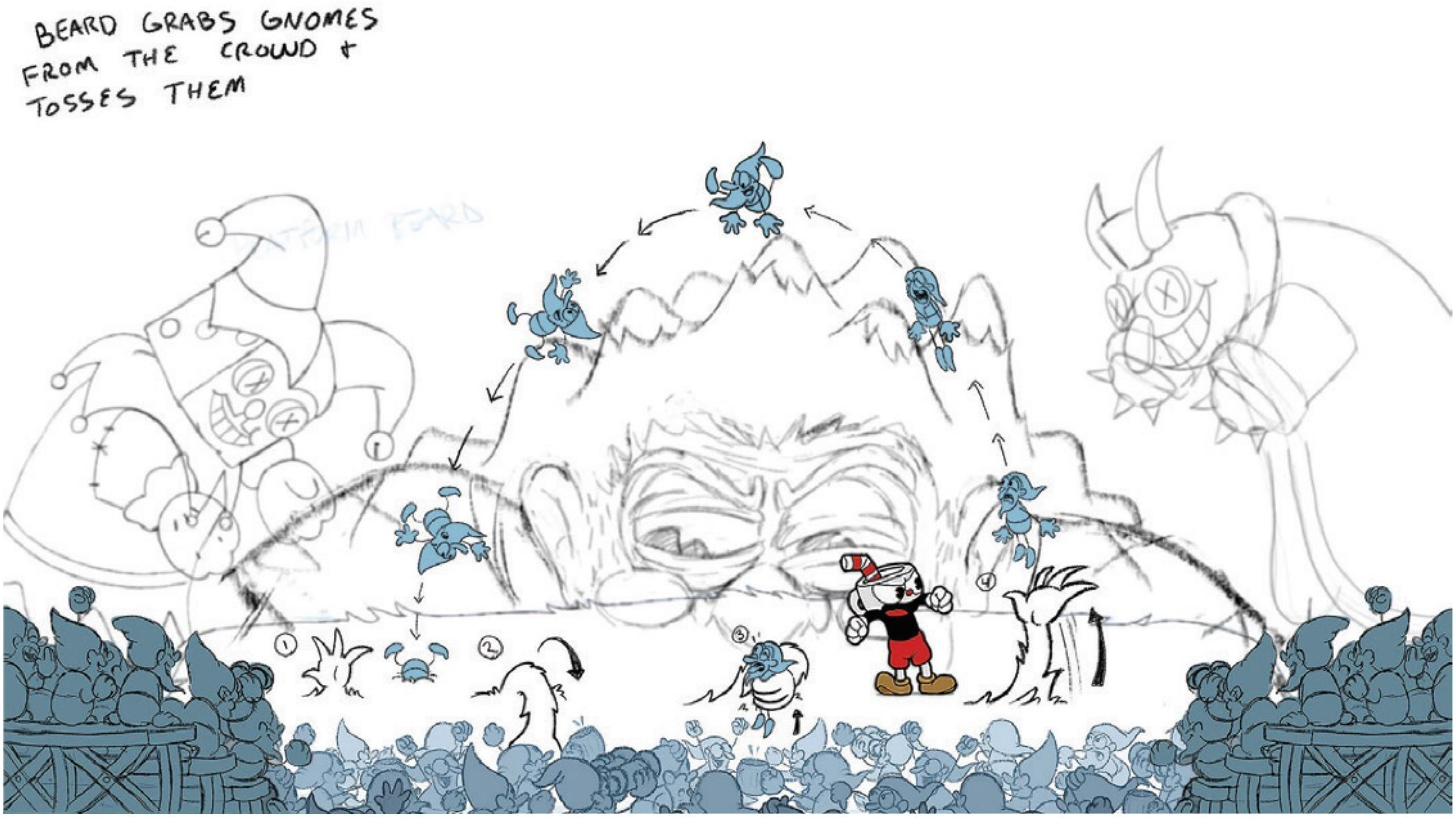
The key to Glumstone's first phase would ultimately lie with its relentless swarm of gnomes. Though the gnomes take inspiration from classic fairy tale tropes, they're also highly inspired by characters in the iconic arcade beat 'em up Golden Axe. Known in the original game as "thieves," gnomes in blue drop magic pots, while those in green drop health in the form of meat and other food items.

The gnomes seen in Glumstone's tussle would don similar colors, cooking up noxious potions in the giant's mouth and wielding stone hammers – an homage to the Golden Axe bosses, The Bad Brothers. Other gnomes would spring forth to fire off gold nuggets, while even more were painstakingly animated directly into the stage's beard-covered surface, only popping up to stab players who lingered too long in one spot. Glumstone's eventual stage name, "Gnome Way Out!," would be far from an exaggeration.

From the beginning, Chad and Jared knew they wanted an animal element in the first phase of the Glumstone fight. Only two species made the cut – geese and bears. Though MDHR conceived both as giants in their own right, they were eventually scaled down to bring more perspective to Glumstone's size. Instead of one gnome riding a giant goose, the team decided a sudden storm of smaller geese was a better obstacle. The gnomes stayed, riding atop the majestic Canadian geese on miniature saddles, a nod to the various mountable beasts in the Golden Axe series and MDHR's Canadian roots.

Getting a bear on screen was far more perplexing in terms of design. Initial concepts show Glumstone holding up a cave or a cage in one hand while enticing the bear with a tasty fish. One concept even had the giant making a cave out of his own hands. Though these ideas were fun and creative, MDHR ultimately deemed them too visually distracting, leading to the final animation of Glumstone simply picking up a bear by its tail and dangling it near players.




BEARD GRABS GNOMES FROM THE CROWD + TOSSES THEM
PATTERN BEARD
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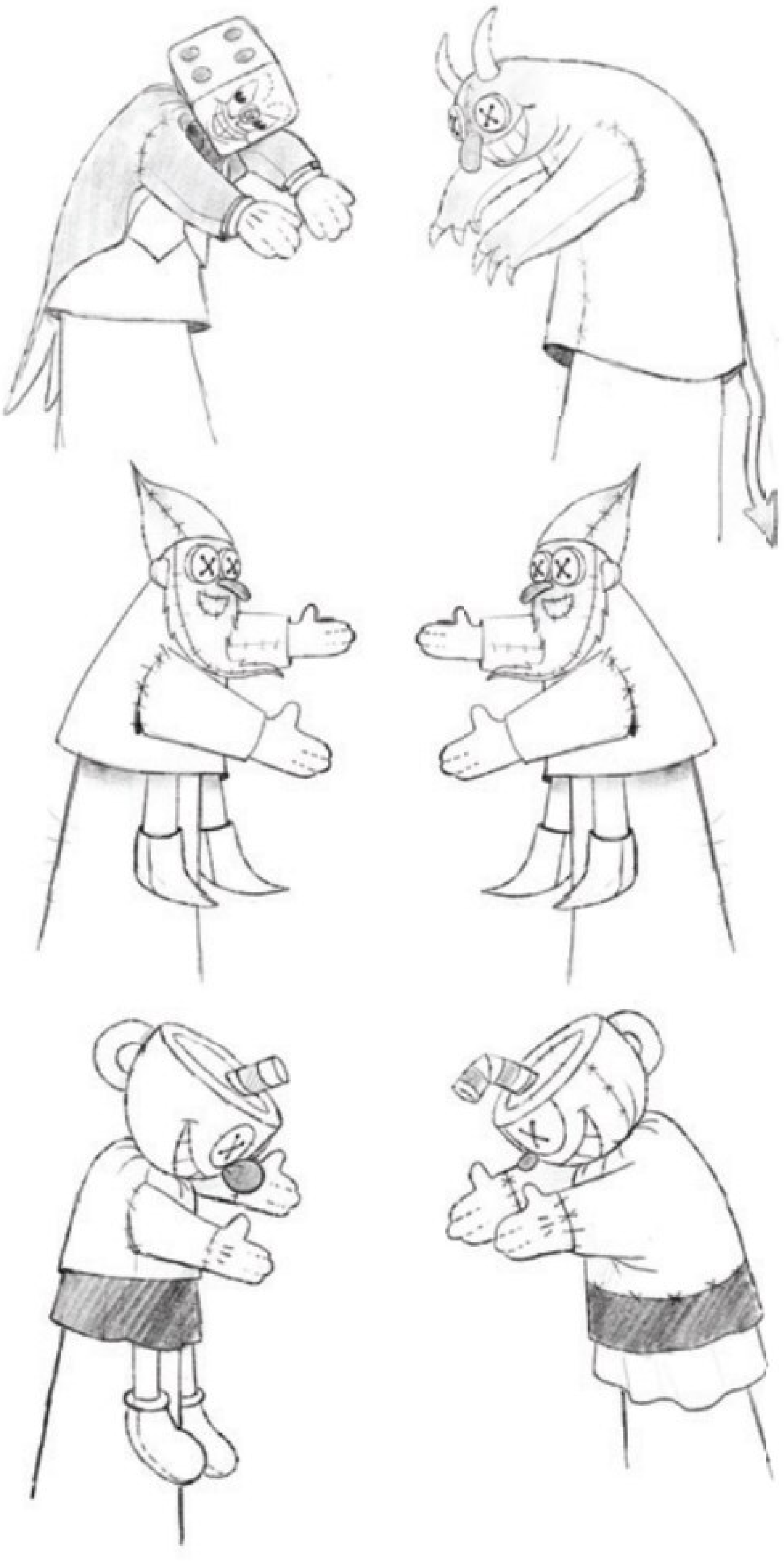
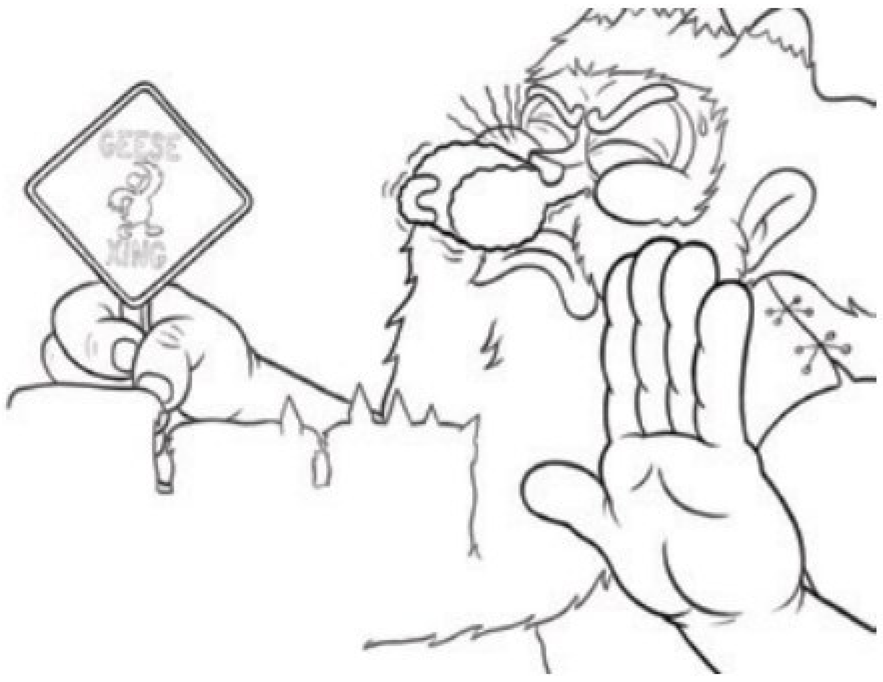




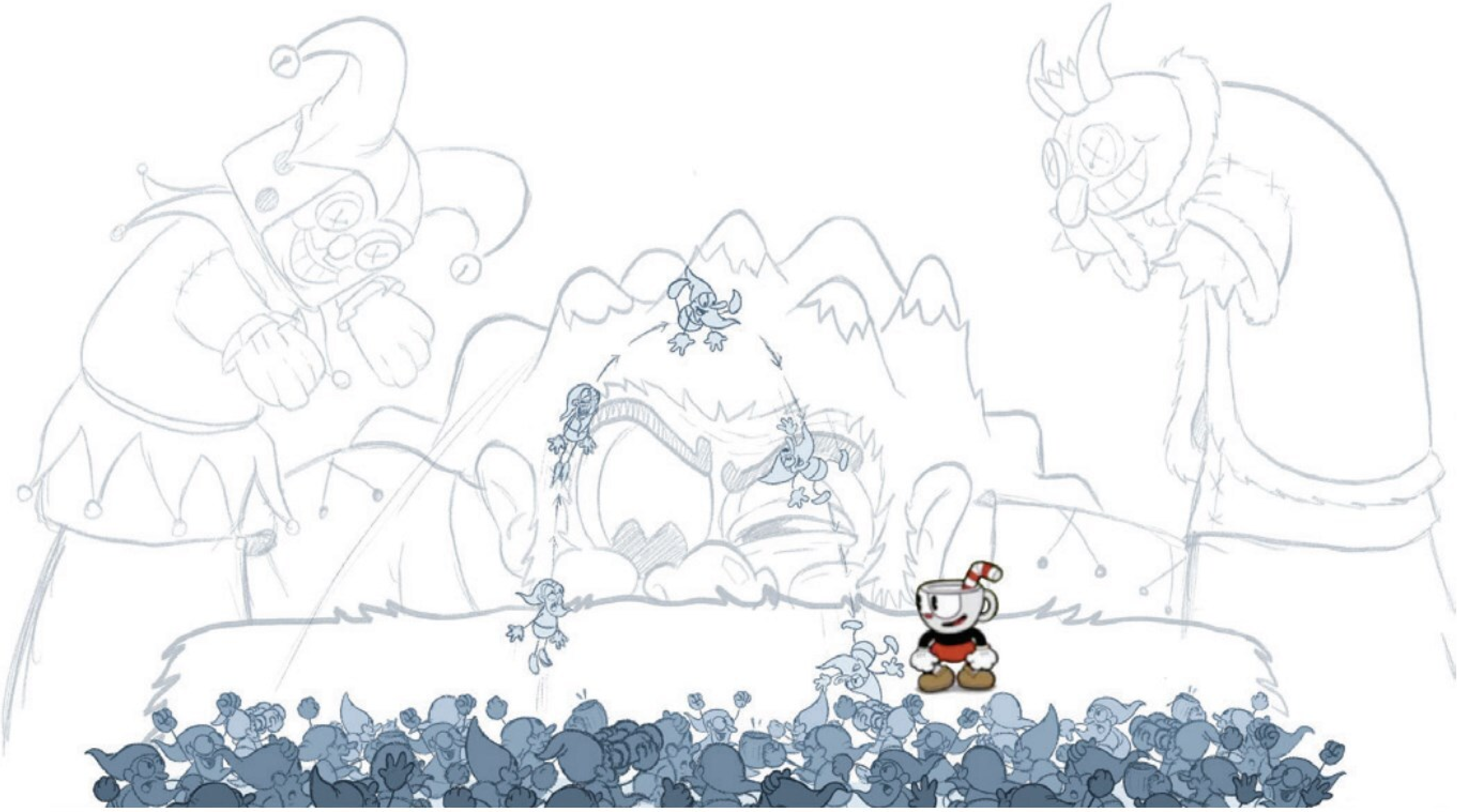
Not satisfied with a handful of Golden Axe references, Chad and Jared snuck in a few subtle references to one of their favorite SNK fighting series. The first is the patch of fur on the bear, the same pattern seen on wrestler Big Bear in Fatal Fury. "Once you discover that and you're like, 'Okay if the bear has an SNK reference, is there any way for the geese to have an SNK reference?' And then we're like, 'There sure is!'" laughs Jared. The reference in question is on Glumstone's "Geese X-ing" sign – a silhouette of a goose performing the signature Double Reppuken of Fatal Fury combatant Geese Howard. Both animal sight gags perfectly encapsulate the "blink and you'll miss it" retro callbacks the Moldenhauers love leaving in plain sight.

Master of Puppets

While Glumstone's first phase is a frenzy of beasts and gnomes, one of the most hectic in Cuphead history, the second takes a much different approach. Early in development, the idea of Glumstone attacking with shadow puppets and then real puppets was heavily considered. This idea had evolved into the inclusion of real animals but was still fresh in the team's mind when it came time to craft the next phase.

Along with puppets came a new spin on Glumstone's relationship with his gnomes, taking inspiration from the beloved Canadian children's show *The Friendly Giant*, which featured a mild-mannered giant interacting with different miniature models and puppet friends. Instead of treating the gnomes as pests, the Moldenhauers proposed that Glumstone might enjoy entertaining the little miners with a friendly puppet show of his own design. This concept bred many new questions – most importantly, how the puppets would look and attack.

"We sketched up a few sock puppets, but there's something that just feels 1980s about sock puppets," says Jared. "So then we moved on to more of a felt-shaped, flappy mouth puppet, something closer to a muppet. But again, that has a weird '50s to '60s

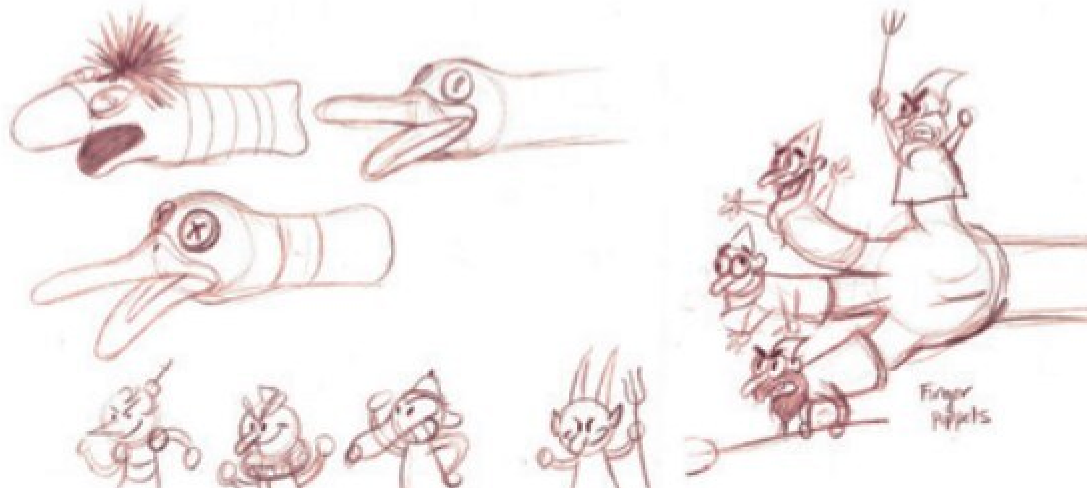


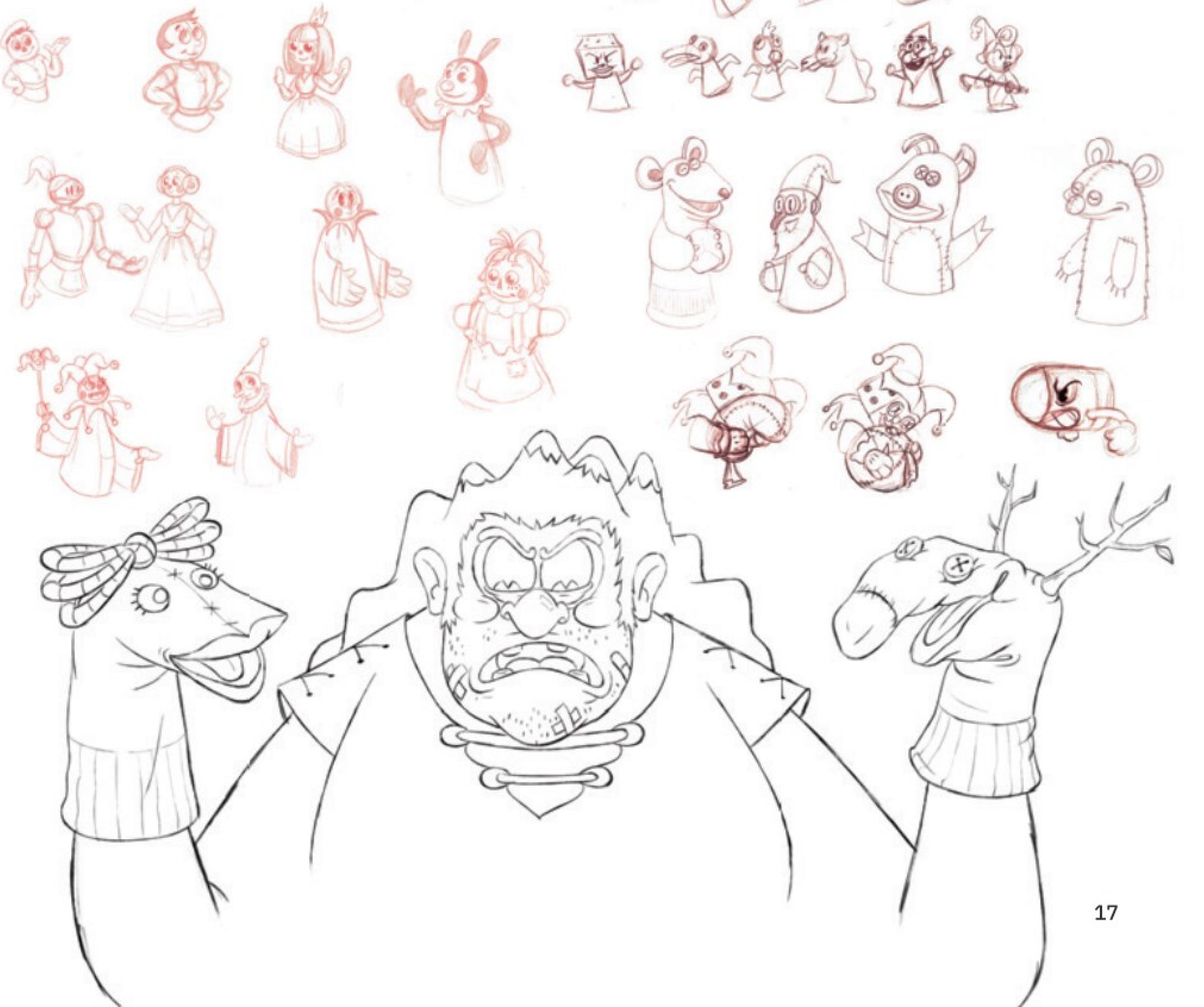
vibe, which is why we started focusing on puppets from older eras."

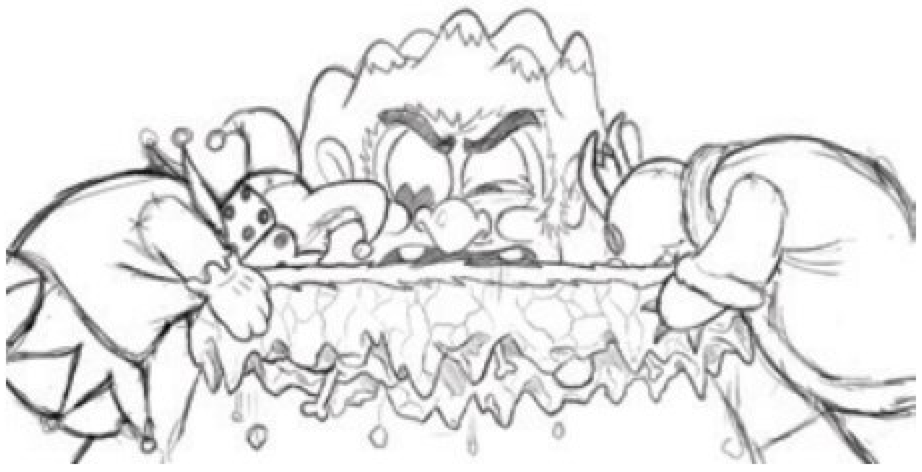
While digging into puppets from the 1930s, the team rediscovered the work of Ladislas Starevich, a Polish-Russian stop-motion animator known for his award-winning work with puppets and dead bugs. It was within Starevich's 1934 film *The Mascot* that the Moldenhauers spied a lanky devil puppet that reminded them of Cuphead's own villain.

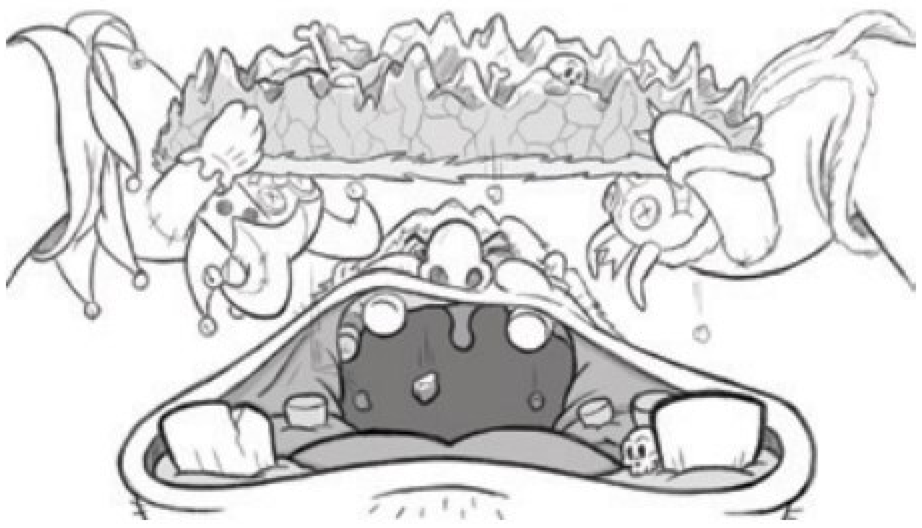
"A decision was made along the way to get it back to medieval times, where it felt like the performers could make a satire on the kings and queens of the era," says Jared. "It was a way to kind of teach the peasants and the regular folk about valuable lessons without being jailed. So we were like, 'Well, maybe it's weird, but we could try to make a king version of the Devil and a jester version of King Dice, and they could reenact this thing that would tie it back to the original game.' I think that was the key moment that felt more alive, that really pulled the DLC island into the experience of the original game."

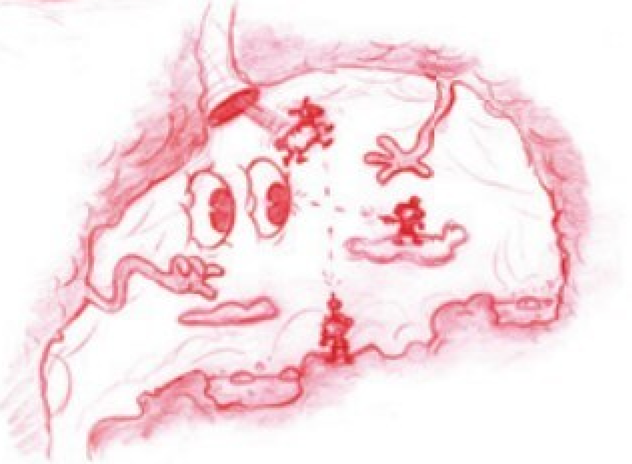
Though the first iteration of puppets was going to be twirling a jump rope between their stubby hands, the swinging motion created issues with projectile timing and didn't mesh well with the new theme. The rope was soon replaced with a bouncing sack of coins; one hoisted back and forth by the corrupt figureheads of Inkwell Isles. Once paired with the beard-bouncing antics of gnomes, the second phase found an enjoyable balance of theme and challenge.











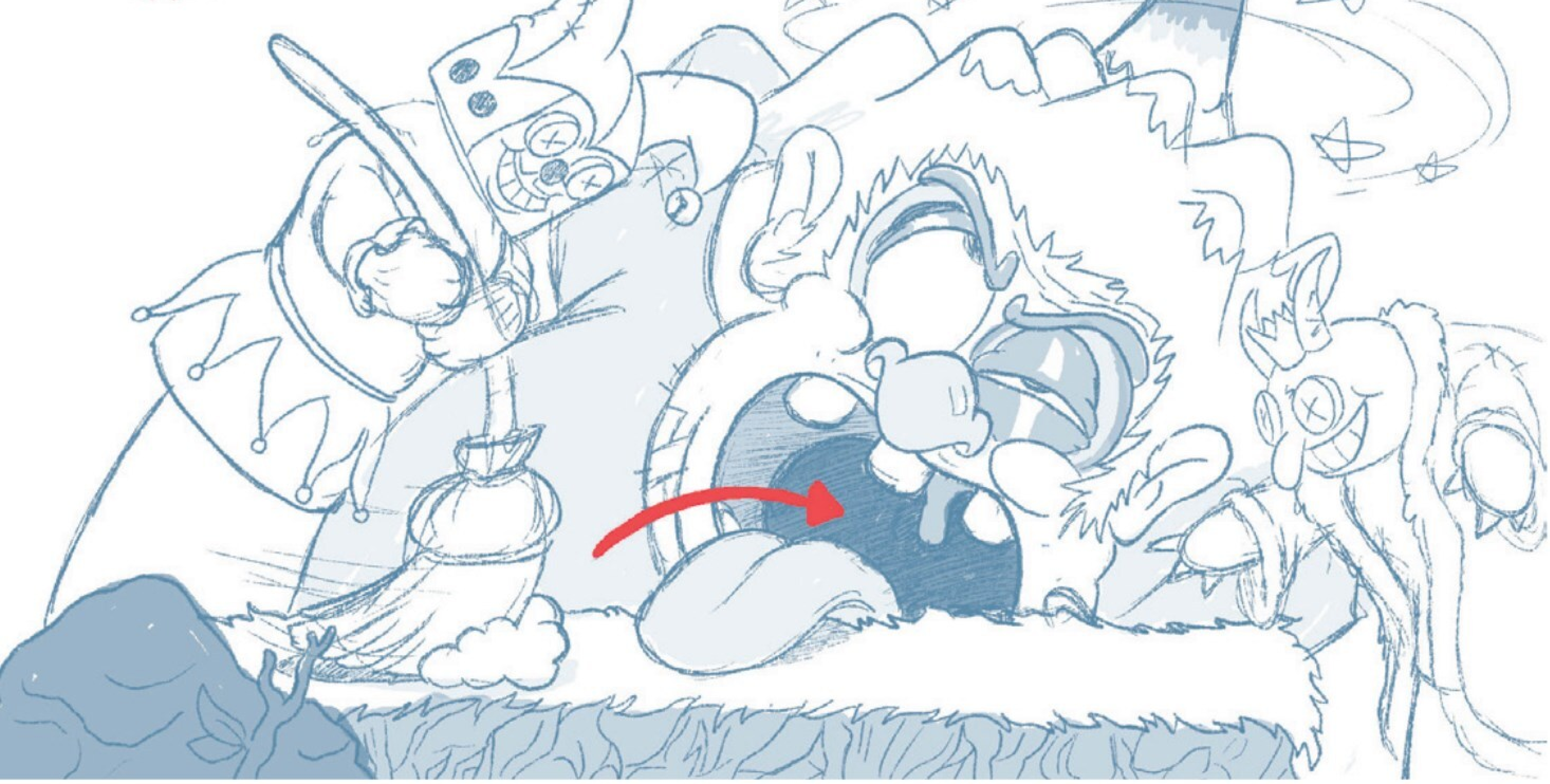
Gut Check

Anyone who has played Cuphead knows the subconscious panic of encountering a boss' final phase. For this reason, Studio MDHR tries to push for final phases that are neither the longest nor the most difficult compared to those that came before. Not that the last stage of every battle is easy to overcome or adapt to, but the team does its best to ensure the environment isn't too overbearing as players' hit points wane and they inch closer to success.

Much like the concepts of gnomes, animals, and puppets, the theme for phase three came to the Cuphead team early on – players were going to be eaten alive. Inspired by the long-standing video game trope of fighting a supersized enemy from inside their very guts – perhaps most notably in Yoshi's Island for the Super Nintendo – Glumstone's last resort would be an act of desperation. Chad and Jared's first thought was to have players go up against a master gnome, one lying in wait inside the giant, but thematically it didn't make much sense. Players needed to be attacking Glumstone, not some enemy taking refuge in his stomach. Thus a bulging stomach ulcer with a mind of its own would take the stage, spitting bones and chicken legs, a final nod to Golden Axe.

Unlike the first two phases, where players could rely on stable (albeit gnome-infested) footing, from the start, MDHR planned Glumstone's stomach as a pit, one that would eventually be filled with glowing green acid à la 1993's Mortal Kombat II. "It was an old idea that we just never pursued, but we really liked the video game moments that eliminate the platforms from you," Jared recalls. "You have to learn to dodge and aim while reducing your play space. We had that pattern down first before we had any concrete idea or layout of what exactly this stomach would look like."

While it made sense that players might be hopping between bits of digested food, it turned out to be a somewhat underwhelming visual. Instead of focusing on what the giant had eaten, the Moldenhauers brainstormed what might live inside his mighty belly. "We looked at some of these nightmarish early Fleischer cartoons, like *Swing You Sinners*," Chad says. "It's almost like our go-to when we want something creepy and monster-esque."



"But it's always important to maintain the cuteness of the nightmare," adds Jared. "It's kind of gross to have ulcers and an acid pit, but then it's completely flipped on its head as soon as you see the ulcer is feeding these cute little animals inside of his stomach."

And so, five sawtoothed monsters, a mix of creepy and cute, were added as the platforms for phase three, their skeletal appearance another subtle nod to Mortal Kombat II's flesh-melting acid pit. Swimming alongside them would be gnomes in full diving gear with blow guns, a direct reference to the scuba ninjas found in the original Shinobi.

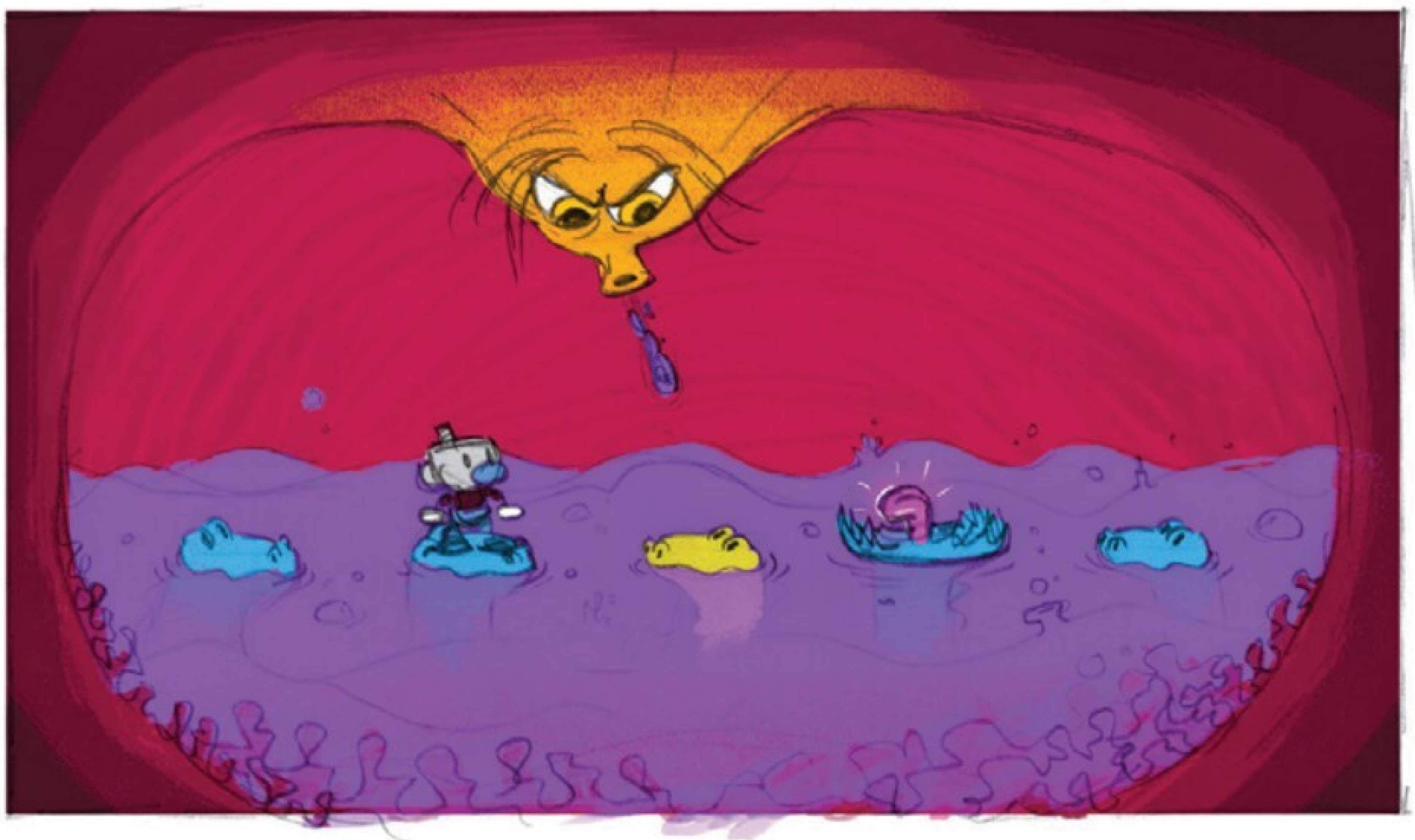
The last aspect of phase three, which would tie everything together, was a living, breathing backdrop. With the ulcer wriggling across the top of the scene, the team wanted a background that could shift and pulsate with it, a task easier said than done. To get the right feel, artist Caitlin Russell spent over 300 hours hand-painting multiple layers and each individual frame of the ulcer's grotesque movement.

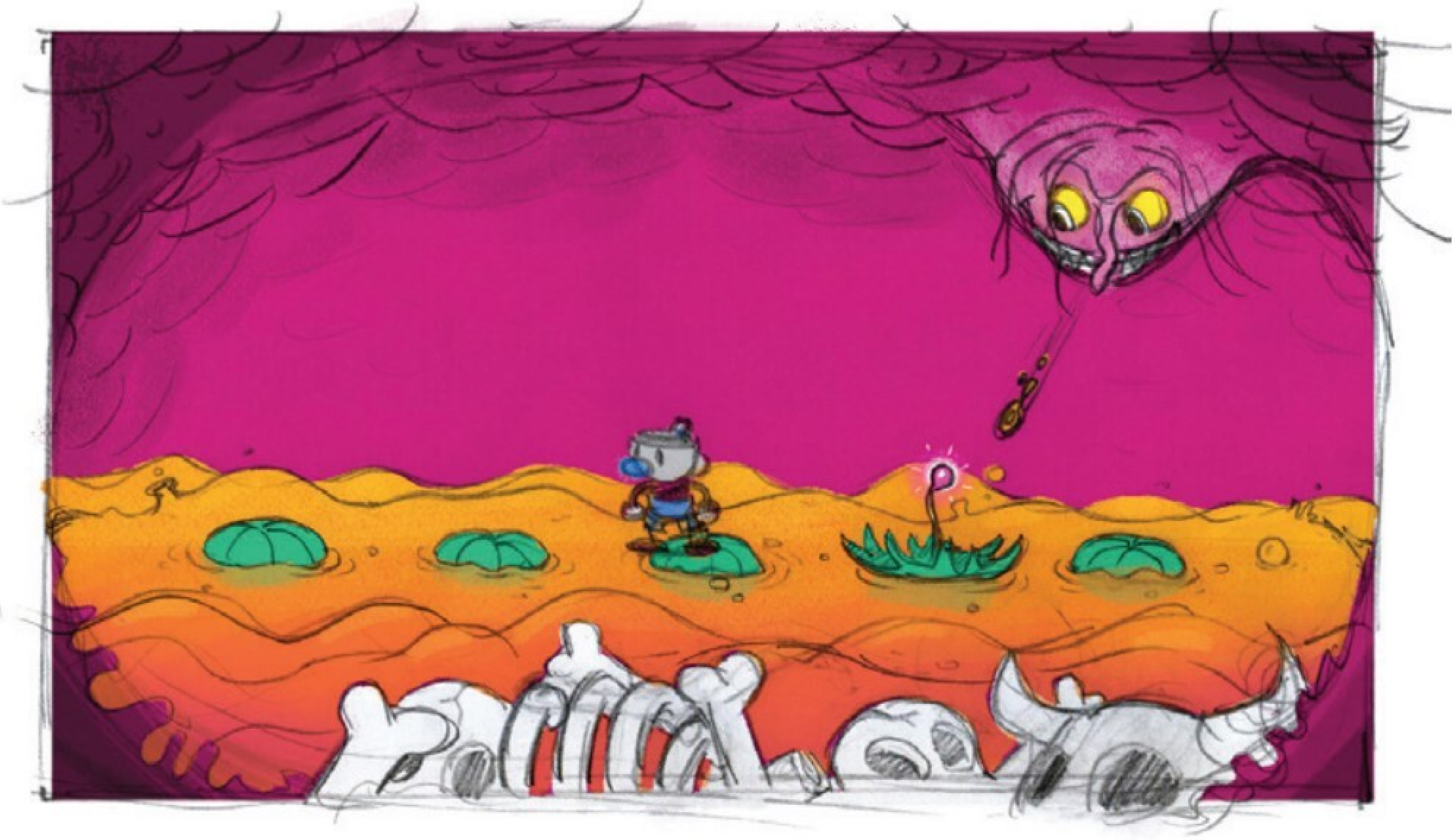
"It's one of those things where you can't quite tell how much work went into it, but if you really look and analyze it, you're like, 'Okay, this is a little bit crazier than maybe some people know,'" says Chad.

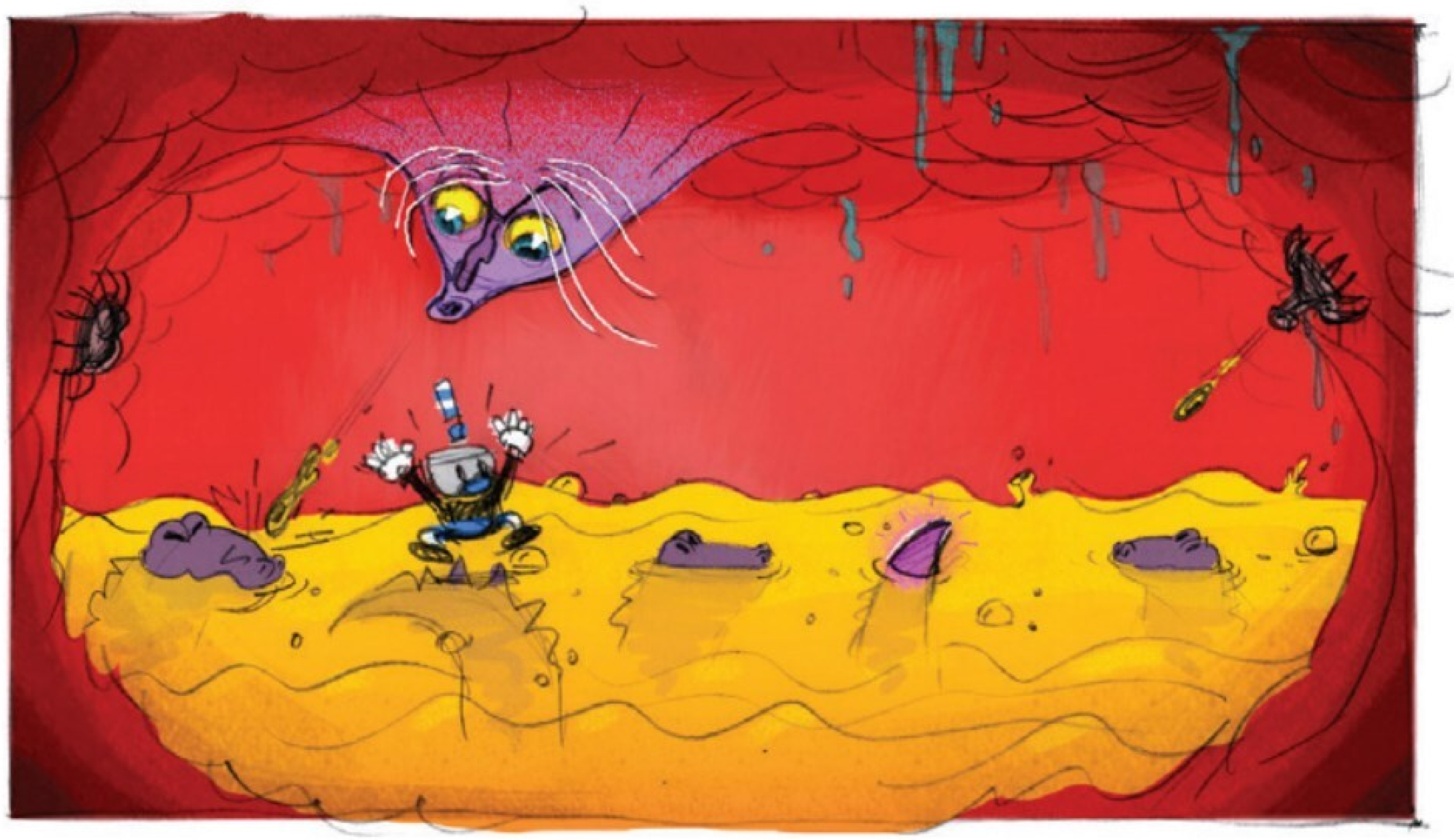
"It's all a painting. It's so much extra work to just get something that doesn't throw you off," Jared adds. "It's only noticeable if you do a bad job and it becomes jarring. Whereas when you're playing it, you're just like, 'Oh, that's a nice background with the ulcer.' But it took a ton of work to fill that experiment."

What a View

And thus, with the ulcer defeated, Glumstone the Giant's battle came to an end. Though the entire boss fight can be finished in under two minutes, the designs, attacks, and thematic storytelling took years to perfect. Coupled with beautiful backdrops and a swinging score by composer Kris Maddigan, the stage was ready to challenge any player brave enough to face the gargantuan boss. The magic of Cuphead comes not just with overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds but also the small surge of joy one feels when discovering a reference hidden in the chaotic hail of projectiles and platforms. The Moldenhauer brothers and their team at Studio MDHR wouldn't want it any other way. ■







THE GAME DEVELOPER FAMILY

How a son's interest in Roblox led to a successful family business

BY ANDREW REINER

FOR THE CLEMENS FAMILY, VIDEO GAMES ARE SYNONYMOUS WITH HOME LIFE. When the Colorado-based family of five sits at the dinner table, ordinary small talk sometimes leads to new video game ideas. As the family's excitement for the game concept grows, one of the kids may run off to make it a reality. As several Clemens attest, the kitchen is a great place to dream big.

All the Clemens children are skilled game creators. Roughly seven years ago, the family's oldest child, Nathan, took an interest in Roblox. And not to play it, since he wasn't into video games at the time, but to explore its deep building tools. He was 13 or 14, already skilled in computer-aided design (CAD), and dabbled in 3D modeling.

"Our family used to do fix-and-flips for real estate," Nathan tells me in a Zoom call with his entire family. "We'd fix them up to sell and rent. I taught myself Google SketchUp to mockup designs for houses to help visualize them. Somewhere along the line, I saw an ad for Roblox online, and I didn't even know there were games on it for a year and a half. I thought it was a [program] where you could model stuff. I hopped on there and learned how to make and sell my stuff. Some people would buy the things I would design. I started contracting for that and eventually caught on that there were games in Roblox and these games make money. I realized I could make these games if I could find somebody who could code with me. So I did. I teamed up with a coder, and we made a game called Infection Inc. It did incredibly well and was the second largest on the platform for a couple of months."

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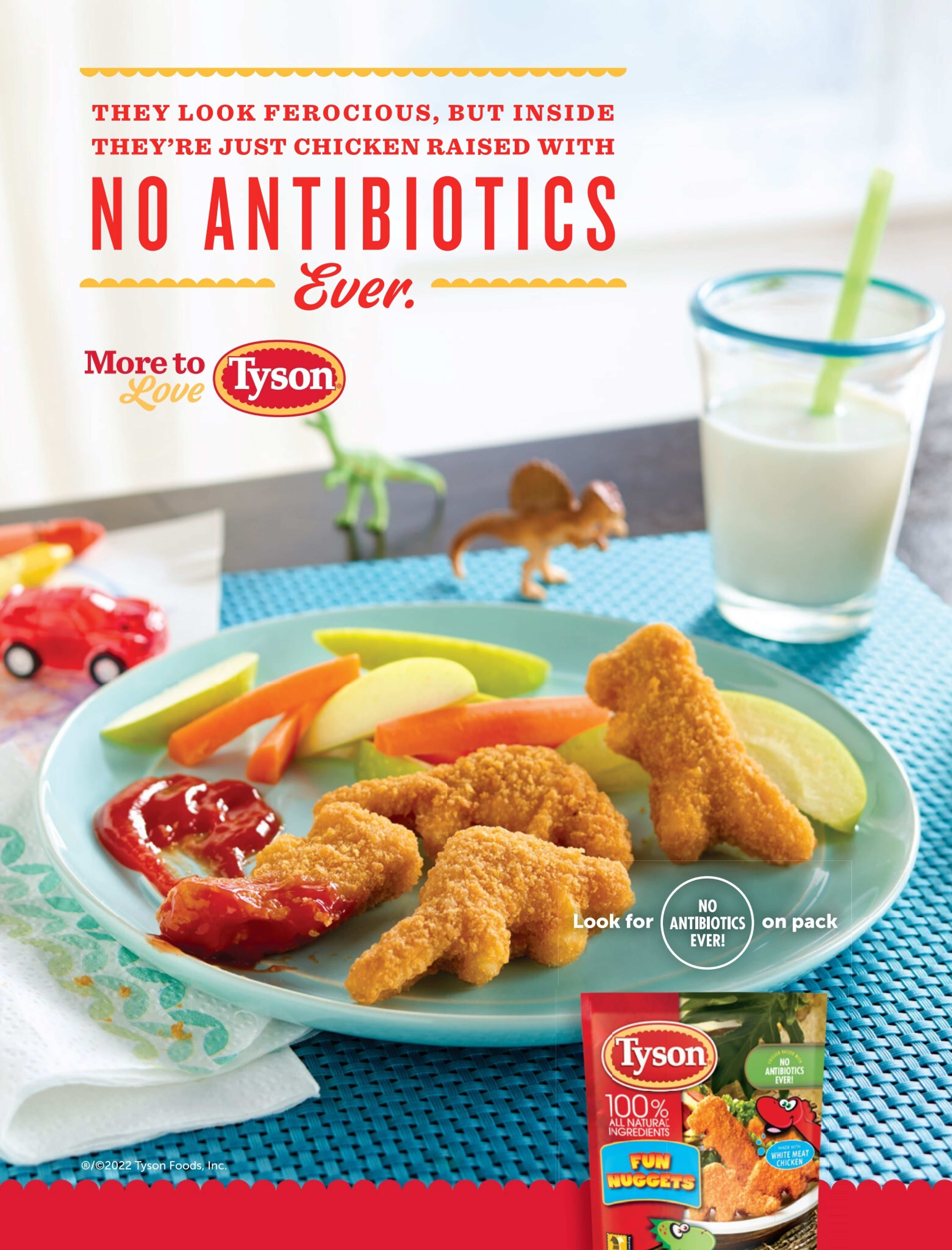
THEY LOOK FEROCIOUS, BUT INSIDE THEY'RE JUST CHICKEN RAISED WITH
NO ANTIBIOTICS
Ever.
More to Love
Tyson
Look for NO ANTIBIOTICS EVER! on pack
Tyson
100% ALL NATURAL INGREDIENTS
FUN NUGGETS
CHICKEN RAISED WITH NO ANTIBIOTICS EVER!
MADE WITH WHITE MEAT CHICKEN

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The word "well" meant the game had between 30,000 and 40,000 concurrent players, which was huge for Roblox at the time, second only to Jailbreak, another player-created game released in 2017.

This eureka-like moment opened Nathan's eyes to a career as a game developer. He tried to continue making games in Roblox by learning independently but soon realized he needed help. He discovered Roblox had an Accelerator Program offering on-site tutoring and mentoring for gifted game creators. Back then, Roblox brought in roughly 30 people, and Nathan was lucky enough to secure one of those seats. He spent three months in the program and exited with the certainty that Roblox could become a full-time job.

Nathan's success caught the eye of his parents, Shannon and Jeff.

"We were thrilled," says Jeff, Nathan's father. "We were wondering if this would be a thing. We do homeschooling. Shannon and I come from educational resource and consultant backgrounds where our whole family philosophy and educational philosophy has been rather than the public school's [approach] of, 'How do we fit the kid into the educational system,' our goals have been 'How do we make these educational resources fit what the kid wants to do?' When we saw Nate take a real liking and interest in Roblox, CAD, and drafting and design, we said, 'Let's pursue this.' We kept feeding that innate desire and curiosity in him. He was super eager and wanted to run with it."

As the kids were homeschooling, Shannon was thinking of ways that she could help teach them business. "Jeff and I have always been entrepreneurial," she adds. "We started several small businesses ourselves, and then Nathan showed me what he was doing on Roblox. He was already making contracts, doing projects, and talking on the phone with the Roblox team. I was like, 'Well, I don't have to worry about it. It's already been taken care of.' He was given the tools to start a company, and we helped out with the rest."

FORMING THE TEAM

Since Shannon and Jeff already had familiarity with upstart businesses, they helped Nathan establish his studio. They invited Nathan into their coworking space within their home, set him up with contractual software, upgraded his email to a professional level, and helped him form an S corporation called Simple Games.

While Nathan is the founder of this Roblox development studio, he doesn't see himself as its head (despite being the CEO). All five family members have their stake in Simple Games and run their businesses within it. "Each of our skills complements each other," says Nathan. "If someone needs help with something, one of us can usually provide it."

Naomi, the older of the two daughters, was the next to join at the age of 14 or 15. She began her career in a community management role, assisting players in Nathan's games. She would interact with them on social channels, answer their questions, and provide technical support. "I then went into coding for a little bit," says Naomi. "After that, I managed my own games and created player clothing. I didn't really try to make this a career until I was about 16."

Rachel, the youngest, was the last to join (also around the age of 14), and she brought a different energy to the group, mainly that she plays games. "I actually love them," she says with a smile. "My first experience with Roblox was playing games instead of making them. I obviously heard about it from Nathan and Naomi, as they were making games, but I really loved playing them. I was like, 'Hey, since I know art, I can help out with this.' I do graphic renders and merchandise designs and help with art however I can. I'm also a bug tester. I've learned I'm great at breaking games."

All five Clemenses are now making their own games, but they aren't doing it alone. While Shannon is currently learning how to code to help build her projects and assist the team, Simple Games now has 13 full-time employees, including a programmer who works within their home. Roughly half the team works remotely, with someone in Eastern Europe and others spread throughout the midwest and southern United States.

FINDING SUCCESS

The name "Simple Games" was workshopped by the entire family and agreed upon as they sat around the dinner table. Nathan used to call his business Undone Studios, based on his gamertag at the time, Undone Builder. The family recounts roughly an hour and a half spent spitballing names until Dad came up with Simple Games. "We really liked that one," Jeff remembers. "It sums up our games. We make games for kids, and we love the simplicity of it – the simple and fun."

The success of Infection Inc. was more than enough to help get Simple Games off the ground and keep it in good shape as the other family members found their footing. To date, the family has created 18 Roblox games – some hitting it big, while others didn't reach the creator's expectations. Hits like City Life and Pet Salon are ongoing and receive timely updates to engage the player base. Simple Games is not your typical development house, but it's finding just as much success as well-established game studios.

"If a small, homeschooled family in Colorado can make it, pretty much anyone can," says Jeff. "I will say making games is different than playing them. A lot of people go into development thinking, 'I love to play games, and I'm good at them, so making them should be a breeze,' but while that may be true for some, for us, there's so much work that goes into them – from design and progression to monetization. It takes a lot of discipline and a team that communicates well to see a game through to completion. You have to gauge if that is possible with your own family, the dynamics of it and if you can communicate and work together. If you can, it's truly a rewarding thing for a family to do. The sense of accomplishment of launching a game and getting good reviews is great. It stinks when a game flops – you get those, too!"

Nathan recommends anyone who hopes to get into Roblox game development or get their kids or family involved should first attempt to go to the Accelerator Program that helped launch his career. "It's the best first step," he says. "If you can get in – it will be hard. This is not an easy program – it will quickly tell you if this is a career for you. If that's the case, it will give you the necessary resources. It is by far one of the best things Roblox provides. It is immeasurable. Even if Roblox doesn't work out, the skills learned in it apply to other industries. I know people who have gotten jobs at Microsoft and Apple because of their experience with Roblox. There's almost no downside to figuring it out."

I asked Jeff and Shannon how school, life, and game development were balanced, and the answer was an immediate "school comes first." For Rachel, the only child still in school, this means roughly two or three hours of weekdays go to schooling. After that, she's free to begin work, should she want to. Everyone in the family works at their own pace and determines their hours.

"For me, I think the hours work out to a normal job," Naomi says. "It's having time management skills. 'Okay, I have this much work to do and this much time to do it.'"

Does a work shift end with bedtime? "Every now and then," Jeff says with a laugh.

Shannon says the hours can sometimes be staggered since some workers are in different time zones. "There may be days where they are up until 2 a.m., so we sometimes have to be flexible. Since [the kids] were homeschooled, they have been in charge of their own schedules. They know how much work needs to be done. They are allowed to decide when they want to complete their tasks. If they want to sleep in a few hours and stay up a little longer, they can. Some of us, like myself, go to bed a little earlier, whereas others stay up later. It evens itself out in terms of production."

If someone does work late and has meetings early the following day, Naomi says another family member sometimes steps in to fill their shoes to find a balance within the company and each of their workloads. Again, that's the family dynamic.

"This is definitely not a traditional work environment," Jeff adds. "It's not from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. It kind of goes throughout the day and night."

The Clemenses spend a lot of time in their home but have also become globetrotters to research new areas for games and relax. As the family says, they can build games from anywhere with an internet connection. They've been to London, India, Alaska, Scotland, and more.

Simple Games has had several hits, but none bigger than City Life, which has brought in six figures in revenue. Simple Games donates 10 percent of all revenue to charities like Doctors Without Borders, The Trevor Project, and WildArk. So far, the donations total over $200,000.

In the hour I spent talking to the Clemenses, my focus shifted from talking to a family to serious game developers. I got the sense they all love working together and are eager to launch the next Roblox game everyone will want to play. ■

OPINION

STREET FIGHTER 6'S MODERN CONTROLS MAKE IT FUN TO PLAY AGAINST ROOKIES

BY MARCUS STEWART

STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS one before. You invite a friend over to play your fighting game of choice. They're either rusty or have never played, but that's okay; they just want to have a good time throwing hands. To accommodate, you assume a weaker form, avoiding obliterating them while they haplessly button-mash in a futile attempt to be competitive. As a fighting game fan, I've been on both sides of this situation, and neither is ideal. Street Fighter 6's new Modern Control Type is an excellent solution to this age-old problem.

While I'm not a fan of the name ("Simplified" or "Streamlined" would be better), I adore the concept of a beginner-friendly button layout. This optional feature eases execution by mapping special attacks to a single button combined with a directional input. The in-game description states the scheme is "designed for players who want to fight without memorizing and practicing special move combinations first." It's a fantastic remedy for easing newcomers into the typically intimidating genre.

Unsurprisingly, a handful of smug hardcore fans were outraged because they think the feature makes Street Fighter 6 too easy. "I spent years practicing how to execute the Spinning Bird Kick, and so should you," they yell to no one. Instead of debating an optional fighting game mechanic like you're arguing against student loan forgiveness, recognize that if you're skilled at Street Fighter, battling a Modern Control Type player shouldn't matter much.

Anyone who's clobbered an opponent who unskillfully spams special moves knows memorizing a flashy attack is far less important than understanding the optimal time to use it. This new feature minimizes difficult combo executions, a historical barrier for casual players. By tearing down this wall, newcomers can focus on learning the nuances of timing and strategy instead of fumbling over quarter circles and high punches. If this accommodation threatens you, well, maybe you aren't as good as you think?

I played many rounds of Street Fighter 6 during Summer Game Fest against my less experienced coworker, Alex Van Aken. Thanks to the streamlined control option, he could keep up with me, and I could go all out, making the duel a blast for both of us. Furthermore, I noticed the longer we played, the more Alex improved at strategic play; he even started baiting me into his assaults. I was in awe at how rapidly he picked up advanced behaviors – probably because he wasn't pausing every few seconds to say, "Lemme check my move list really quick."

Street Fighter 6 has impressed me in several ways, but I love how the Modern Control Type brings rookies up to speed so everyone can have fun without pulling any punches. Veterans and newcomers better watch out; the kid gloves are finally coming off for good, and I can't wait. ■

TOP FIVE

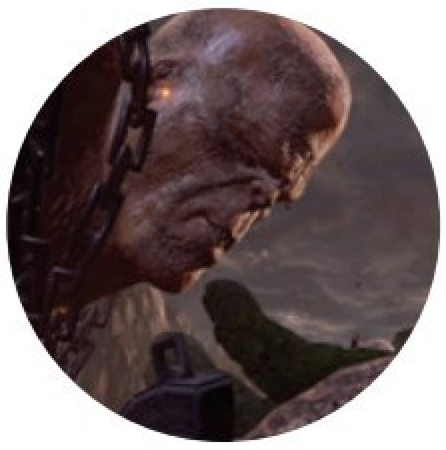
GOD BUTCHER

God of War's deities, titans, and legends we loved toppling most

BY MARCUS STEWART

1 God of War 3 kicks off with a bang thanks to the spectacle of battling **Poseidon**. The God of the Sea sports a killer design and multiple chaotic fight stages. We were out of breath when we put him down, and the adventure had only just begun.

2 Facing **"The Stranger"** proved Santa Monica Studio still knew how to open a GoW game. This titanic battle felt like the studio's take on a *Dragon Ball Z* fight. Smashing each other through trees and boulders erased any doubts the series had lost its touch by changing mythologies.



3 The jaw-dropping sense of scale that GoW 3's **Cronos** fight provides is unmatched. Humbling a Titan, including engaging in cringe-inducing fingernail gore, empowered us like few confrontations have and was a technical marvel.

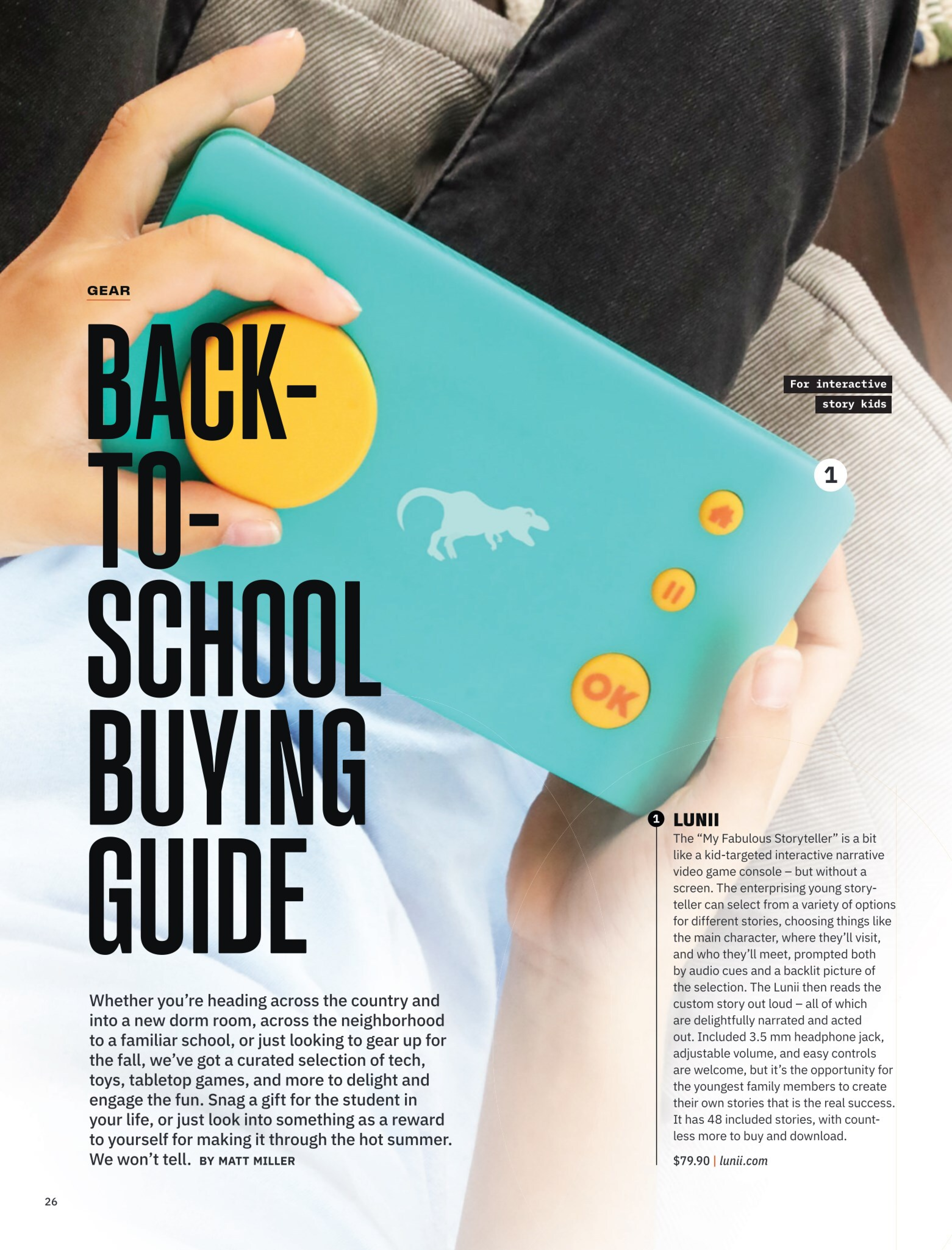
4 Congratulations, you overcame all of the Valkyries! Your reward is facing **Sigrún**, the Valkyrie Queen and the most difficult opponent in Kratos' 2018 adventure. Besting this legendary warrior is thrilling, brutal, and pushed our skills to the brink in the best way.

5 Dismantling the fabled **Colossus of Rhodes** still ranks among Kratos' most "wow" inducing moments. We love that the enchanted statue doubles as a living platforming stage, and the presentation showed us the PlayStation 2 could still impress in 2007. ■

GEAR

BACK-TO-SCHOOL BUYING GUIDE

Whether you're heading across the country and into a new dorm room, across the neighborhood to a familiar school, or just looking to gear up for the fall, we've got a curated selection of tech, toys, tabletop games, and more to delight and engage the fun. Snag a gift for the student in your life, or just look into something as a reward to yourself for making it through the hot summer. We won't tell. **BY MATT MILLER**



❶ LUNII

The "My Fabulous Storyteller" is a bit like a kid-targeted interactive narrative video game console – but without a screen. The enterprising young storyteller can select from a variety of options for different stories, choosing things like the main character, where they'll visit, and who they'll meet, prompted both by audio cues and a backlit picture of the selection. The Lunii then reads the custom story out loud – all of which are delightfully narrated and acted out. Included 3.5 mm headphone jack, adjustable volume, and easy controls are welcome, but it's the opportunity for the youngest family members to create their own stories that is the real success. It has 48 included stories, with countless more to buy and download.

$79.90 | *lunii.com*

2
For quiet
studying

3
Start your vinyl
collection

4
Relieve
back pain

❷ 900 LEGACY NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES

You've got plenty of options for noise-canceling headphones to drown out the party next door, but few offer this level of premium-level performance and style at this price point. You either love or hate the carbon fiber design, but there's no denying it's a sleek look setting itself apart from competitors. Supremely comfortable and with sound quality that is a match to more familiar brands, it also happens to feature superb battery life and simple-to-grasp earcup controls. If you're willing to purchase for quality over a more recognizable brand name, you won't be disappointed.

$249 | *phiaton.com*

❸ AT-LP60XBT TURNTABLE

Under the wide umbrella of music fans, serious audiophiles often eventually turn to vinyl for superior sound. The gaming world has increasingly embraced this trend with a growing number of soundtracks. Audio Technica offers a solid entry-level turntable in the LP60XBT, featuring a fully automatic stereo belt-drive, a removable hinged dust cover, and the capability to play both 33- 1/3 and 45 RPM records. This model also supports both a traditional wired connection or outputting to speakers or headphones over Bluetooth – a convenience for users who might need to take a roommate's happiness into account.

$219 | *audio-technica.com*

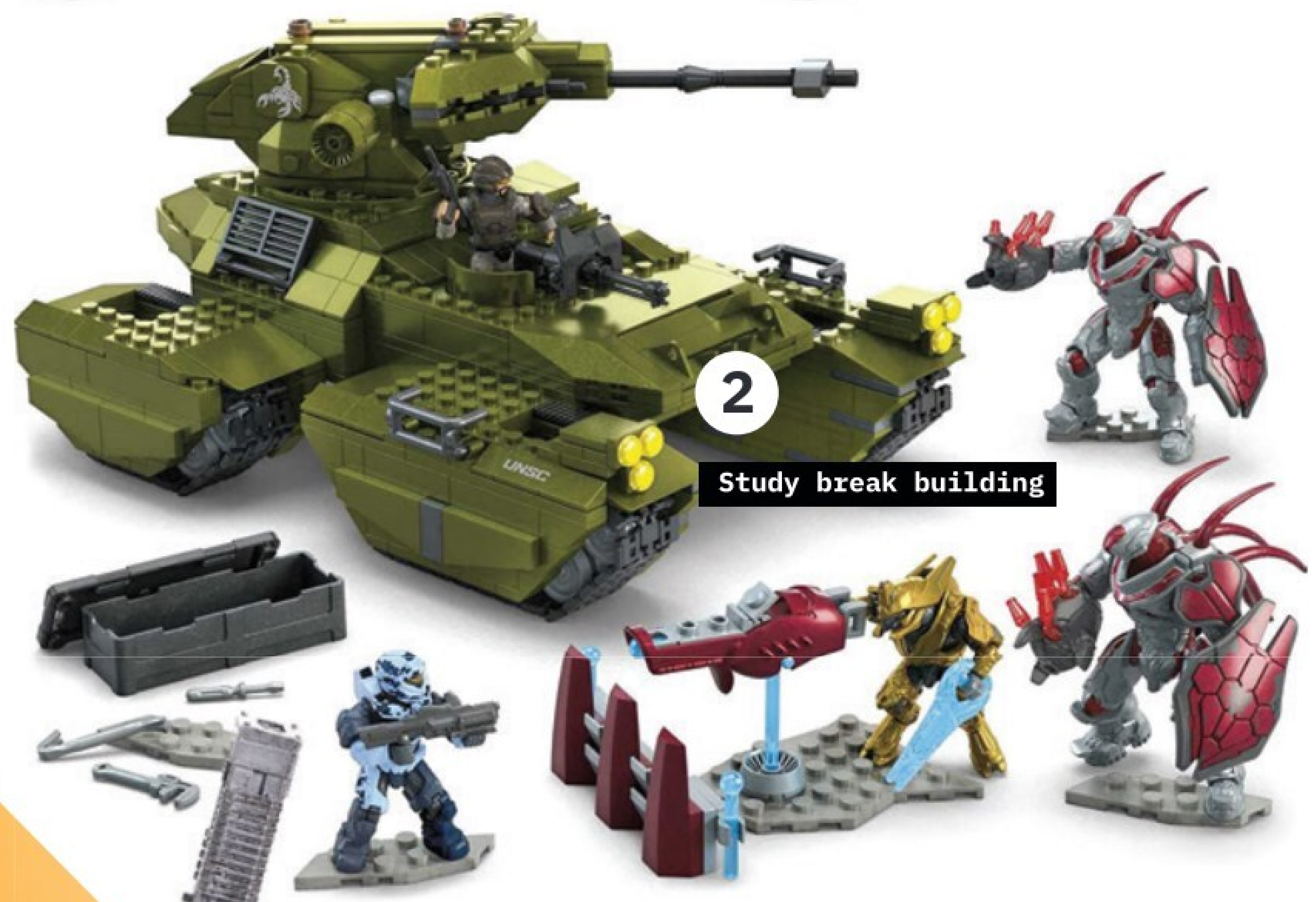
❹ EXO SCUF CUSHION

Inevitable slouching is a hazard of gaming; it's easy to lean forward or back into the controller, and end up with a sore back. This inflatable cushion aims to rectify that problem with a natural resting place for your arms and hands, and a wraparound fit that holds in place whether you're on a sofa or chair. By adjusting the air-fill, you can nail your preferred level of support. It also comes with a storage bag for packing away or taking on the go.

$39.99 | *scufgaming.com*

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

1
Easy pack-along



3
Top-tier comic collectible

❶ PRO COMPACT CONTROLLER FOR XBOX/PC

Many third-party controllers go wild with optional bonus inputs, but few cater to the need for a smaller form factor – whether because of space needs or simply smaller hands. Nacon's affordable wired entry does just that, offering 15% smaller grips and overall size but with the features you'd expect on higher-end controllers, including programmable buttons, trigger sensitivity tweaks, and textured grips – not to mention an included option for Dolby Atmos for Headphones. It's a great fit for certain hand types, or maybe just that small carry-on bag you're taking to school this year.

$49.90 | *nacongaming.com, gamestop.com*

❷ MEGA HALO INFINITE UNSC SCORPION CLASH

Weighing in at just under 1,000 pieces, this awesome set brings the iconic UNSC tank to life as it appeared in the latest Halo game. Five included figures help you set up the perfect shelf battle diorama. The buildable rolling tank treads are a particular highlight. The set also includes an alternate split build for a spacecraft and smaller tank – albeit less rooted in established vehicles from the fiction. Will this Scorpion tip the balance of the war against the Banished? You never know until you try.

$89.99 | *megaconstrux.com*

❸ X-MEN: BISHOP PREMIER COLLECTION STATUE

Whether you recall his presence in the comics or the classic animated series, few characters had the cool factor of the time-traveling mutant Bishop, back from the future to warn the X-Men of dark days ahead. Standing at roughly 12 inches, this defining take on the character features dynamic posing and an incredibly detailed sculpt, capturing the soldier as he strides into battle.

$250 | *diamondselecttoys.com*

Great audio,
limited space

Fantasy fare

❹ BEAM (GEN 2) SOUNDBAR AND SUB (GEN 3)

At some point in our lives as tech enthusiasts, we want a great gaming and movie sound setup without the space or logistics for traditional surround. Sonos' space-conscious soundbar has output that belies its footprint, offering impressive, room-filling sound, Dolby Atmos support, and accurate performance for everything from dialogue to tunes. While a strong performer in its own right, upgrading with a connected Sonos Sub fills in the low-end with rumbling depth – just one of many additions and expansions available if you choose to go all-in on a Sonos multi-room setup down the road.

$449 (Beam), $749 (Sub) | *sonos.com*

❺ BALAGOS, ANCIENT RED DRAGON FIGURE

It almost feels reductive to call this towering rendition of one of the Forgotten Realms' fiercest monsters a miniature, but here we are. WizKids knocks it out of the park with this take on D&D's most iconic beastie, the red dragon. The Flying Flame terrorized the countryside of Faerûn, but he can instead reign over your collecting shelf. Top-notch paintwork is apparent across an 18-inch height and nearly 2-foot wingspan. Pity the adventuring party whose dungeon master actually deploys Balagos onto the table.

$346 | *shop.wizkids.com*

❻ JURASSIC WORLD: THE LEGACY OF ISLA NUBLAR

Go back to the roots of Jurassic World with this legacy cooperative game, in which players work together over 12 distinct game sessions to build a successful dinosaur theme park. The bright and colorful aesthetics help the game pop on the table and recall the earliest days of the film franchise. Fun gameplay has you introducing new (and often dangerous) dinosaurs to the island, and solving for the inevitable problems that arise. New rules, events, and characters roll out throughout the campaign, so you never know what will happen next. Don't stop to think if you should play this engaging adventure – it will all probably turn out fine.

$120 | *funkogames.com*

A GRIPPING JOURNEY of Ambition and Adventure!
JURASSIC WORLD
The LEGACY of ISLA NUBLAR
A Game by Prospero Hall
WHEN DINOSAURS RULED THE EARTH

6
NUBLAR
CARNIVORE
HERBIVORE
WU CREATION

Gaming for
the whole semester

1
Low-cost
commuting

2
Change of pace
role-playing

Tournament
ready
3

❶ L885 ELECTRIC CARGO BIKE

For tech-savvy students avoiding the painful pinch of current fuel prices, the L885 offers ease of use, a smooth ride, and an excellent alternative to a car for trips under 50 miles. High payload capacity and an included rear rack can house backpacks, groceries, or anything else up to a 400-pound limit. A low center of gravity from the smaller rear wheel and throttle or pedal-assist motor control maintain superb stability. Dual-leg kickstand, included headlight and functioning brake light, and seven-gear shifter are built-in options, and optional baskets and carriers (at an extra cost) can add everything from water bottle holders and cell phone mounts to kid carriers.

$1,999 | *flyer.radioflyer.com*

❷ D&D: JOURNEYS THROUGH THE RADIANT CITADEL

Wizards of the Coast offers up one of its most intriguing new role-playing experiences in a long while. The book details the Radiant Citadel, a magical city floating through the ether with mysterious connections to distant lands. But it also provides 13 short standalone adventures, all written by people of color to speak to their cultures and lived experiences in the real world but reflected into role-playing. The result is a rich tapestry of stories tapping into inspirations we don't always see in the D&D world, and that has the potential to lead to some fantastic evenings of gaming.

$49.95 | *dnd.wizards.com*

❸ FIGHTING STICK ALPHA

Responsive, durable, and aesthetically slick, Hori's latest entry for fighting game enthusiasts is a surefire winner. The proprietary Hayabusa joystick and buttons allow for the aggressive use players will throw its way during match play and remain in top condition. Both are designed for professional level play, so even the slightest twitch or press registers – whether you meant it or not. Up to four custom profiles, a 3.5 mm audio jack, and replaceable top-panel art; this is a stick for contenders, and you'll pay for the privilege of play.

$199 | *horiusa.com, gamestop.com*

STAR WARS
GROGU

❹ STAR WARS: THE MANDALORIAN LIFE-SIZED GROGU

It's relatively rare that you can snag a life-sized representation of a favorite fictional character. But when that character is around 16 inches in height, it's an attainable dream. This excellent rendition of The Child is made of resin and features an optional Mythosaur skull medallion necklace and engraved nameplate. The expressive eyes are especially captivating. He's watching you, so don't threaten his dad.

$250 | *denuonovo.com*

❺ NERF HYPER BLASTERS

NERF blasters continue making strides towards ever-move impressive ways to pelt your buddies with foam. The Hyper line uses small ball rounds that can spit forth from your preferred Hyper blaster at absurdly high speeds – high enough that every blaster in the line comes with required protective eye goggles. Hopper feeds allow new rounds to tumble into place at an even greater speed, ensuring you can unload quickly. Great fun – but here's hoping you enjoy picking up your scattered ammo!

Starting at $21.99 | *nerf.hasbro.com*

5
NERF HYPER

Aiming for fun

❻ TITAN EVO 2022 GAMING CHAIR

Secretlab's latest gaming chair is among the best on the market, featuring a smart array of ergonomic choices that help it to hold up to rugged and consistent use. That includes adjustable lumbar position and curvature, three chair sizes to fit height and weight needs, a magnetically connected headrest, and intuitive seat and armrest adjustments. In addition to a leatherette finish, the Titan Evo 2022 offers a fabric option – a relative rarity in the category. Highly customizable and built around longtime use and comfort, it's stylish, functional, and professional.

Starting at $549 | *secretlab.co*

SECRETLAB
6

For desk setups

❼ BACKBONE ONE PLAYSTATION EDITION

The original Backbone One is one of the best options for a controller to your iPhone. The new PlayStation Edition offers the same ease of use and ergonomics, but with aesthetics directly inspired by the PS5 DualSense's sleek white look. It's a stellar solution for players who enjoy the Remote Play app, letting you plug directly into your phone and start playing with basically no setup. And while it will customize the Backbone app with the familiar PS prompts, this edition still offers the same great useability across the board, no matter what game you're hoping to play on your phone. ■

$99 | *playbackbone.com, gamestop.com*

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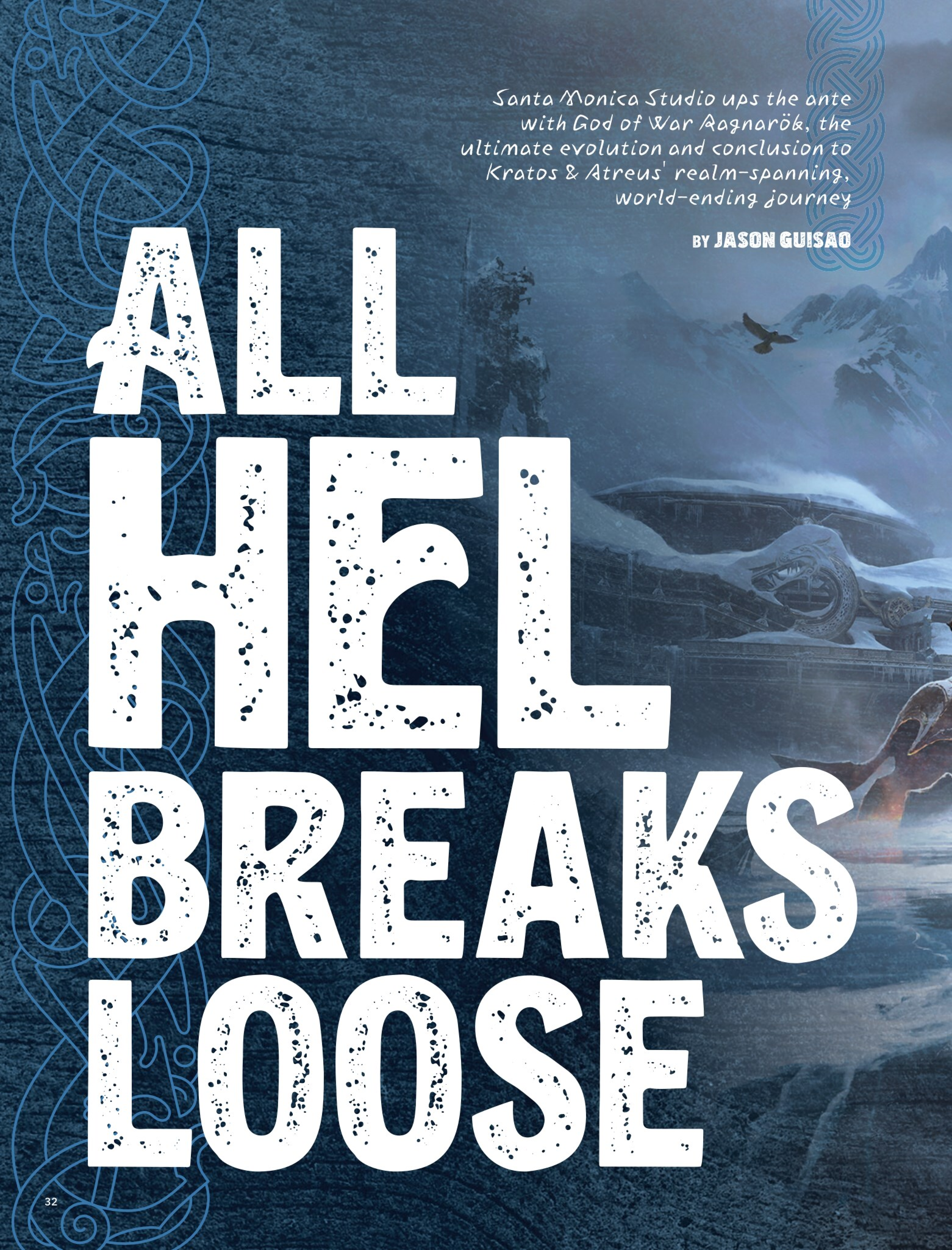
100%
PS Remote Play
Get started
Your Games
CALL·DUTY MOBILE
ASPHALT
ROCKET LEAGUE
Sky
Menu
2 new captures
7

PS5 on your phone



ALL HEL BREAKS LOOSE

Santa Monica Studio ups the ante with God of War Ragnarök, the ultimate evolution and conclusion to Kratos & Atreus' realm-spanning, world-ending journey

BY **JASON GUISAO**

A DIRGE RISES.

The booming energy is palpable and reverberates throughout LA's historic Shrine Auditorium. Composer Bear McCreary's four-minute suite is guttural and piercing – a melody fit for a god. Rising curtains reveal a boy clothed in fur. He plays in the frosted dirt with carved figures, then stands and enters a nearby shack at the growl of his father's voice. Enveloped in darkness, the two speak wistfully about the boy's mother. And when the father emerges from the shadows, thin light rays illuminate his familiar, ashen skin.

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER PlayStation Studios **DEVELOPER** Santa Monica Studio
RELEASE November 9

RAISING KRATOS

Kratos' ultraviolent exploits of the mid-to-late 2000s highlighted the warlord's affinity for anger and cruelty. Homeric encounters with deities like Poseidon and Zeus were power fantasies stuffed with carnage. And when the adrenaline rush subsided, players were left with a man-turned-monster longing for absolution. But like the Greek tragedies of yore, suffering begets redemption in God of War. At the end of the original trilogy, Kratos sacrificed himself and entrusted humankind with the most powerful weapon in existence: Hope. Or so the story goes. It's no wonder that Sony's E3 2016 conference seemed like a rebirth for the Spartan champion. The God of War was back with a weathered disposition, a new, gravelly tone thanks to *Stargate SG-1*'s Christopher Judge, and, most importantly, a son.

With this shift, Kratos was literally and figuratively getting another lease on life. Gone were the verdant, seaside expanses of his Grecian homeland. Outstretched, wintry woodlands and Nordic mountains appeared in their stead. The Leviathan Axe and Guardian Shield were his arms of choice this time around – not the dual Blades of Chaos (at least initially). And no matter the road he took, Kratos, for the first time in series history, did not walk it alone. Atreus, his Nordic-Greek "boy," proved the necessary emotional core for the franchise's return.

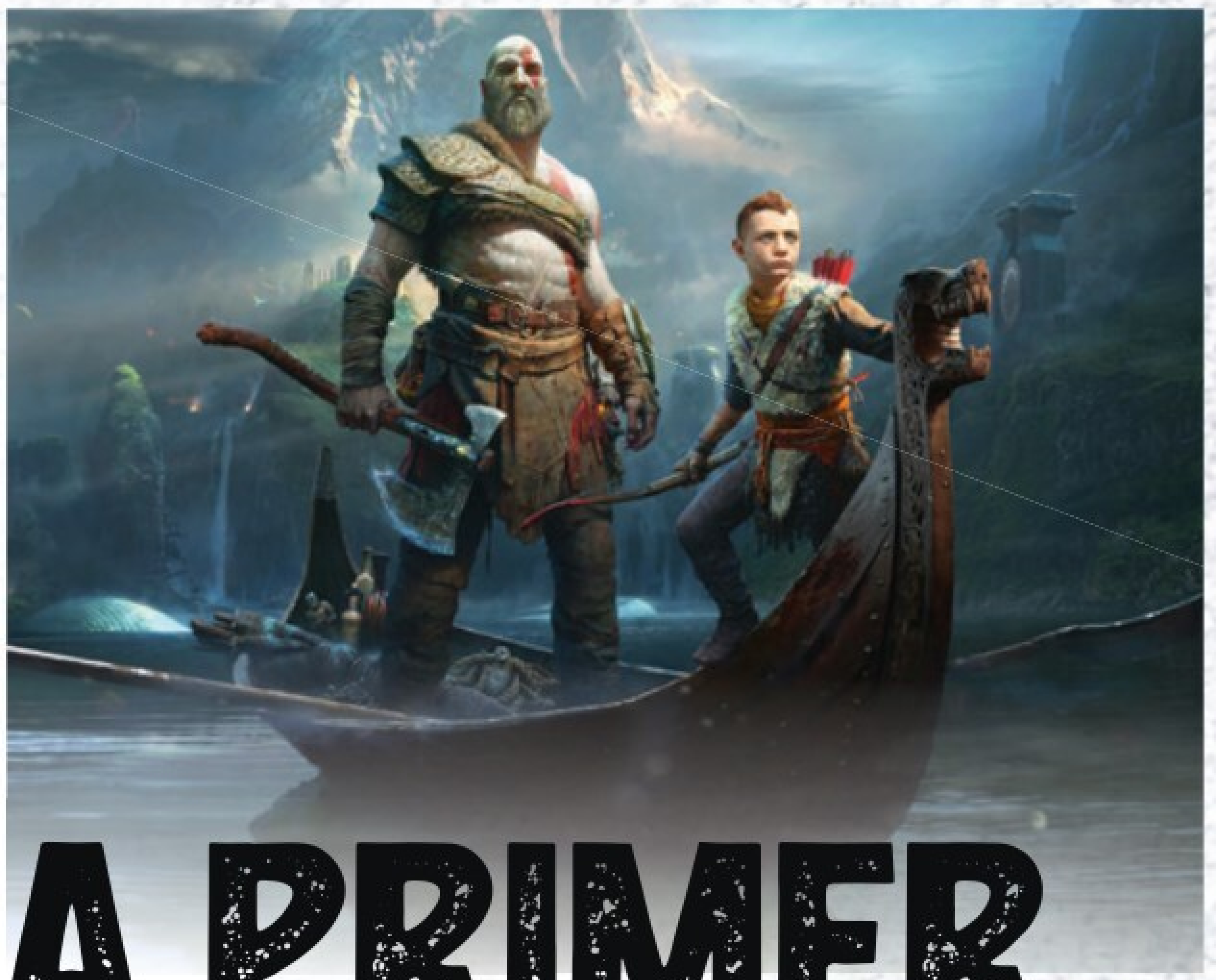
This second coming sported a continuous shot and a free-flowing, over-the-shoulder camera that brought players closer to the bone-crushing action than ever before.

Skill trees made Kratos customizable, and despite the "super-wide linearity" of the world, quest-givers and secret bosses off the beaten path imbued exploration with unexpected depth. All the while, a multifaceted Atreus aided his father in solving puzzles, translating language ciphers, and slaying foes. From marveling at the sheer enormity of Jörmungandr, the World Serpent, to summoning spectral falcons to rout enemies, everything felt integral to reimagining PlayStation's wrathful mascot.

But why reimagine God of War at all? The classic trilogy garnered widespread acclaim, and, before long, Kratos joined the pantheon (pun intended) of gaming's finest action stars. But creative director Cory Barlog felt the need to avoid character stagnation and find a more novel, unique angle. The Norse Mythology era would opt to craft a human story about godhood. Of course, this thematic shift from familial brutalism to an empathetic father-son dynamic posed substantial risks – how do you reinvent a beloved IP without changing what made it monumental in the first place? The dev team embraced the pressure. "Let's be bold," Barlog told us at E3 2017, a year before launch. "Let's jump off the cliff."

God of War (2018) went on to win over 190 Game of the Year awards. Barlog thanked his teammates, former studio head Shannon Studstill and producer Yumi Yang for trusting his vision in a tearful review reaction video that went viral a day before the worldwide release. After a long pause, he contemplatively said, "Sometimes a crazy idea can make something special." Thankfully, Santa Monica Studio's ambitions didn't end there. Whispers of a sequel were finally made real during a PlayStation 5 Showcase in Fall 2021, leaving passionate fans with a single, memorable slogan: "Ragnarök is coming."

While the first game was a slow-burn adventure of Herculean proportions, Ragnarök will amplify the tension as Kratos and Atreus try to prevent a preordained apocalypse. With only a few months remaining until doomsday, I chatted with the sequel's director as well as several designers and watched gameplay footage to get a better understanding of what's at stake in Kratos and Atreus' epic race against time.



A PRIMER

Before backpacking to ancient Scandinavia, Kratos was a respected but dogged general, fooled by Ares into slaughtering his wife and daughter. All of Olympus would know the Spartan's undying wrath.

We start the Norse saga, centuries later, during a period of deep sorrow. Faye, mother and wife to our leads, has died, entrusting the fate of her ashes to the uneasy father-and-son duo she left behind. After a daring run-in with Baldur, a god seemingly incapable of fatal injuries or pain, Kratos and Atreus journey forth to the highest peak in the realm with the hopes of spreading Faye's remains. The two traverse the legendary realms and forge unlikely friendships with Mimir, a wise, disembodied head, Brok and Sindri, dwarven blacksmiths that strengthen the heroes' gear, and a kind-hearted witch of the woods, later revealed to be Freya, Baldur's estranged mother.

From dropping dark elves with well-placed shock arrows to slaying Thor's barbaric children with an icy axe, Kratos and Atreus grow closer while facing their true natures. Atreus starts to shoulder the intrinsic responsibility of being a god while attempting to break the cycle of patricide and despair cursing his bloodline. Kratos steps into his role as a father and even confronts the failings of his previous life in Greece. Despite attaining the catharsis of self-discovery and ultimately fulfilling Faye's dying wish, the consequences of the mission are felt throughout the land. Baldur is killed, giving rise to Freya's eternal fury. Atreus learns his true name – Loki, given to him by his late mother, the (alleged) last Giant in the realms. Oh, and the world is ending.

MIDAS TOUCH

Ragnarök director Eric Williams is an industry veteran, but you've probably never heard of him. That's because he spent the last 11 years juggling his combat position at Santa Monica Studio with several consultant opportunities. Williams is a God of War lifer, having contributed to Kratos' ongoing growth since the first game. While serving as an additional designer on the 2018 installment – an already massive undertaking – Williams also worked with Insomniac Games on Marvel's Spider-Man alongside two other unnamed projects.

At the beginning of Ragnarök's development, Williams sat down with Barlog and hashed out the future of God of War. Instead of generating another trilogy, they agreed the next title needed to conclude Kratos and Atreus' story. If the previous game's extensive development process was any indication, the task wouldn't be simple. In God of War 2018, the developers meticulously reconstructed Kratos, hoping to shine a unique, paternal light on a character synonymous with unpleasantness and ferocity. Thankfully, it worked. The sequel would require a similar strategy, albeit with Atreus as the focal point.

"In the last game, everybody was older and wiser, and Atreus was just a little kid asking questions," Williams says. "But we were like, 'Well, you can't do that again. You need more perspective.' So, how do we grow him up without making him that angsty teen that nobody wants to deal with? His world is very black and white. And around 14-15, your world is not black and white anymore; it gets gray quick. And then it never really goes back to anything other than gray. It gets grayer as you get older because everything's nuanced, and you have no context. We wanted him to have his own point of view and question things. Not, 'I want to know what this is,' but question it like, 'Is this the right thing to do? If Dad's telling me we have to be better, are the ways that he thinks we're being better actually hurting?' That was the big starting point for this story."

Williams was excited to confirm the return of the one-shot cinematic technique that made the last game so memorable

God of War 2018's "true" ending hinted at Thor's arrival and the conclusion of Fimbulwinter, the relentless winter that heralds Ragnarök. In a dream sequence, the sky came crashing down, and a cloaked visitor prepared to confront Kratos and Atreus. Almost instantly, the community was reeling, and queries surrounding the sequel's potential beats began to surface: *'Would Atreus step into his role as Loki? What other Æsir gods were set to make an appearance? Would the leads take on everyone's favorite Norse icon or, better yet, wield Mjölnir? Is Kratos going to die?'* Last fall, a reveal trailer and screenshots of the ensemble cast provided some essential plot details and left prospective players hungry for more.

Three years have passed, and the land is covered in perpetual snow. Atreus knows a catastrophe is imminent and implores his father to help him stop it. Kratos is worried that their interference could catalyze war with Asgard. One thing is for sure: The world is in danger, and people need a hero (or two). While staving off the end times, Kratos and Atreus cross paths with old faces – Freya, Thor, Brok, Sindri, and Mimir – and new – a dwarf named Durlin with a pet octopus, Loki's prophesized lover, Angrboda, Odin, and Týr, a supposed *peaceful* God of War. Williams aptly compares Kratos and Týr's first meetup in the 2021 reveal trailer to Hulk Hogan versus Andre the Giant.

YOUNGBLOOD

Atreus, son of Kratos and Faye (otherwise known as Laufey by her people), occupies a unique place in the God of War lore, being part god, part Jötunn (or giant), and part mortal. He possesses a wide array of skills, including linguistic and physical prowess. When we met him for the first time in 2018, his temperament fluctuated between modesty and even entitlement. In Jötunheim, Atreus began to accept his identity, and even stumbled upon Loki-centric prophecies that depicted significant events from his voyage with Kratos.

As far as the sequel goes, Atreus is older, wiser, and looking for answers. Even as Ragnarök threatens to destroy all he holds dear, the boy is convinced of his higher calling.

LOVE & THUNDER

Freya and Thor are Ragnarök's primary antagonists. Even though the reclusive witch's deific roots as Frigg remain a mystery for most of the 2018 playthrough, her unrivaled expertise in Seiðr magic and general secrecy is the writing on the wall. During Kratos and Atreus' final struggle with Baldur, Freya tries to reconnect with her tormented son and instead becomes the focus of his ire. In response, Kratos kills Baldur to save Freya's life, but his decision is met with resentment. The heartbroken mother swears to exact her revenge. "In that moment, Kratos robbed her," director Eric Williams says. "That should've been her choice to make. If you go back to Freya's cottage, there's that line: 'I guess we're the bad guys now.' The family that they created is now broken."

Thor's shadow loomed large over Kratos and Atreus' trek to Jötunheim, as the two often listened to first-hand accounts of his monstrous deeds. One wayward spirit recounted his mother's demise at the hands of a drunken Thor, and Kratos used the anecdote to remind Atreus of the gods' indifference toward mortals. With his progeny dead, Thor is set to make a roaring, rage-induced entrance in the upcoming sequel. If we've learned anything about Santa Monica Studio's brawny God of Thunder, it's that he probably won't be calm or reasonable.

"If you liked the way Baldur went, and you liked the depth of him, I think you'll very much enjoy both Thor and Freya," Williams says with a smirk. "There's no such thing as a tertiary character in our world – there's how much screen time they get, and then how much depth we can give them within that screen time."

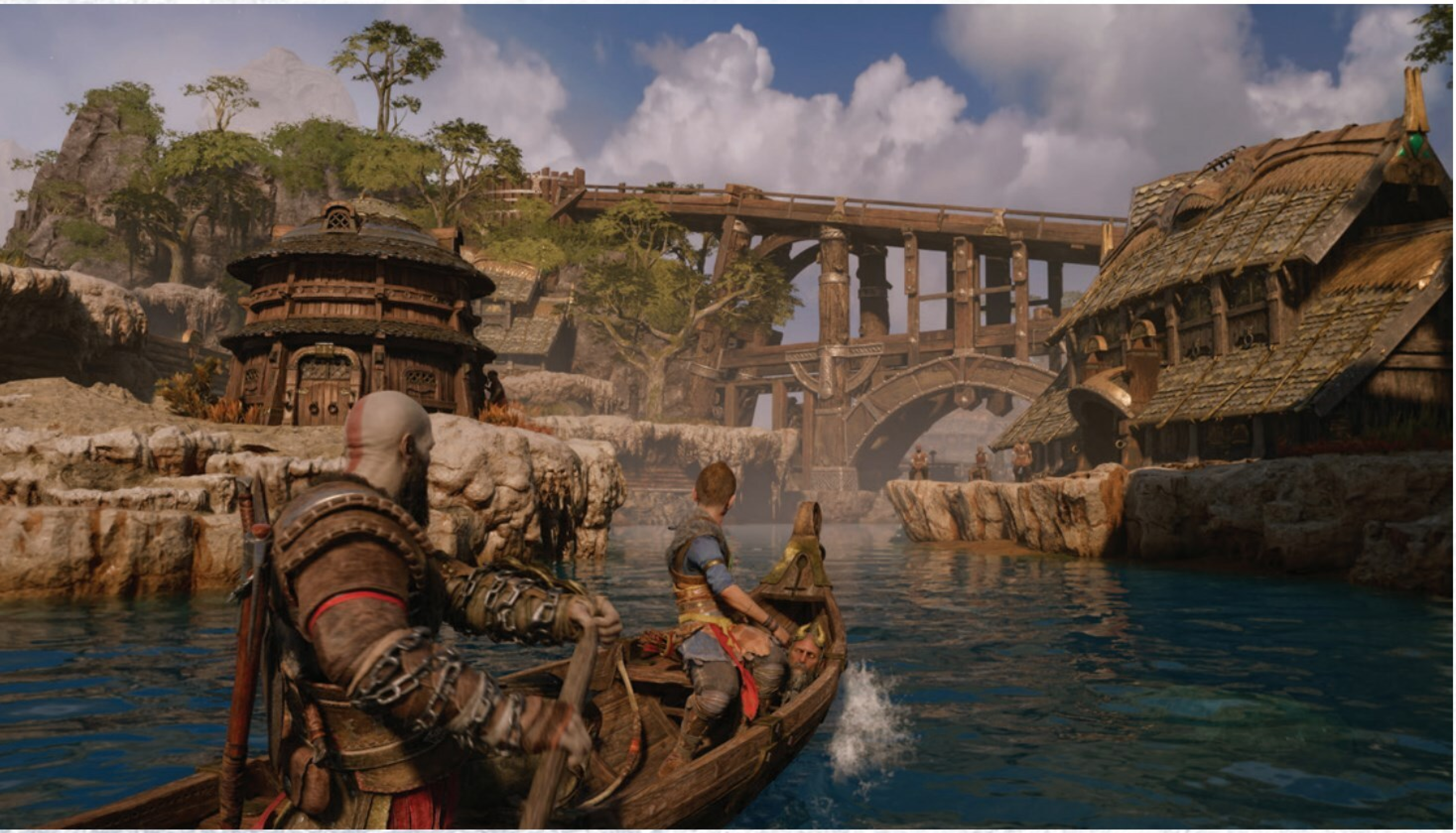
"We look at the characters in the game and all the ways they relate, and a commonality comes back – family by blood and family by choice," Williams says. "Sometimes family by blood is a great thing. Sometimes it's a terrible thing. And then you might make a choice, like, 'I'm going to saddle up with this person,' and they end up being a maniac. There's the Kratos-Atreus family, and Mimir is the uncle. You got Freya and her family, but Baldur's dead. Then you got Odin, Thor, and that family. And then you've got the Huldra. There are all these little families, and how they connect is going to be fun for people to discover."

WITHIN THE (NINE) REALMS OF POSSIBILITY

That same sense of discovery drove players to chart courses throughout the last game's map. Winding footpaths led to expansive hubs at a scale unlike previous God of War games. Ornate chests holding rare equipment and Jötnar Shrines with lore murals were just some of the items awaiting wide-eyed players across six realms. Golden path locales like Midgard and its massive Lake of the Nine, Alfheim, home to light and dark elves, Helheim, the underworld, and Jötunheim, the land of Giants, were sprawling zones in their own right, filled with enough content to keep players engaged. Yet, the optional but equally impressive Niflheim and Muspelheim realms pushed player skills to the limit with vigorous combat trials. Despite the size and myriad navigable backdrops, the Norse universe felt connected. Odin barred access to Asgard, Vanaheim, and Svartalfheim, but Williams says players will get to explore all nine realms in the sequel and that "The ones you've seen before are going to feel new again."

The frostbitten forest from God of War 2018's early hours is just as everyone remembers, but Fimbulwinter's frigid grasp extends beyond Kratos and Atreus' home region. The Lake of the Nine is frozen solid, requiring unconventional methods of transportation. Enter: Speki and Svanna, sled wolves that transfer the characters from one far-off point to the next. In verdant areas, players must once again paddle down serpentine streams or trudge through open waters in a canoe, but these various means of travel suggest a journey vaster and bolder than what came before.

The exclusive footage I watched of the dwarven realm, Svartalfheim, provided me with more than enough insight into the depth and complexity of Ragnarök's world. Lead level designer James Riding and level designer Jon Hickenbottom spoke with me about their experience crafting the points of interest, with the former saying,



"We wanted to evolve the gameplay in the level spaces – more variety and verticality. In Svartalfheim, you've got a lot of places that you go to all within one realm. It's so much content."

He's right. As soon as the video starts, I'm thrust into a maze-like depot brimming with wooden machinery, a technical marvel even by God of War's fantastical standards. Water sloshes down rickety ducts sectioned off by sluice gates. I spot towering wheels in the distance, and just overhead, an ore block, suspended in the air by a derelict rig, threatens to crush me. Atreus climbs to an elevated ledge, scouts the area, and offers a plan of action, but not before cracking a joke at the expense of his father's aging knees. Suddenly, the clip jumps forward, and I'm standing on a cliff face with breathtaking views of the entire site. I barely make out the cloudy silhouettes of mountaintops along the horizon. A few feet away, a small chest sparkles, waiting for Kratos to burst in and snatch its well-kept treasure. An abundance of visual cues imply walls are mountable and structures can be acted upon, setting the stage for potentially intricate puzzles.

To best this daunting section of Svartalfheim, players must rely on Kratos' multifunctional toolset: His weapons and, yes, his son. In the recording, Kratos froze sputtering geysers, dismantled steaming pots, and commanded Atreus to fiddle with out-of-reach devices. When recalling the initial mindset and intentions behind crafting interactions in the new realm, Hickenbottom said, "We wanted to show off the dwarves and what they've been doing here. They're using water to propel and move things. Even throughout the different biomes, you can see the dwarves creating huge environments. And then when Kratos comes in, it's like, how does he bend the environment to his will?"

During the final minutes of the B-roll, I watch Kratos and Atreus row past a cavern and into a dwarven metropolis. The boy is stunned, and Mimir triumphantly announces, "Welcome to Niðavellir, brothers." Afternoon half-light falls warmly against the river's surface, and multistorey hovels stand proudly beneath a swaying tree line. Sadly, this magical moment comes and goes. An alarm shatters the tranquility, and dwarven citizens, once carrying out their duties, flee the idyllic vista. Even in a place ostensibly removed from the immediate effects of Fimbulwinter, peace is short-lived. This brief glimpse solidifies the enormity of the task at hand and what's under threat.

"It was a little lonely in the last game," Riding says. "So, specifically with Svartalfheim, we're trying to show this lived world. There are things here besides just you two."

But friendly dwarves aren't the only locals. Less reputable beings roam the countrysides and lurk in dark grottoes. Kratos and Atreus will need to rely on brute force while also using each set piece to their advantage.

THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER

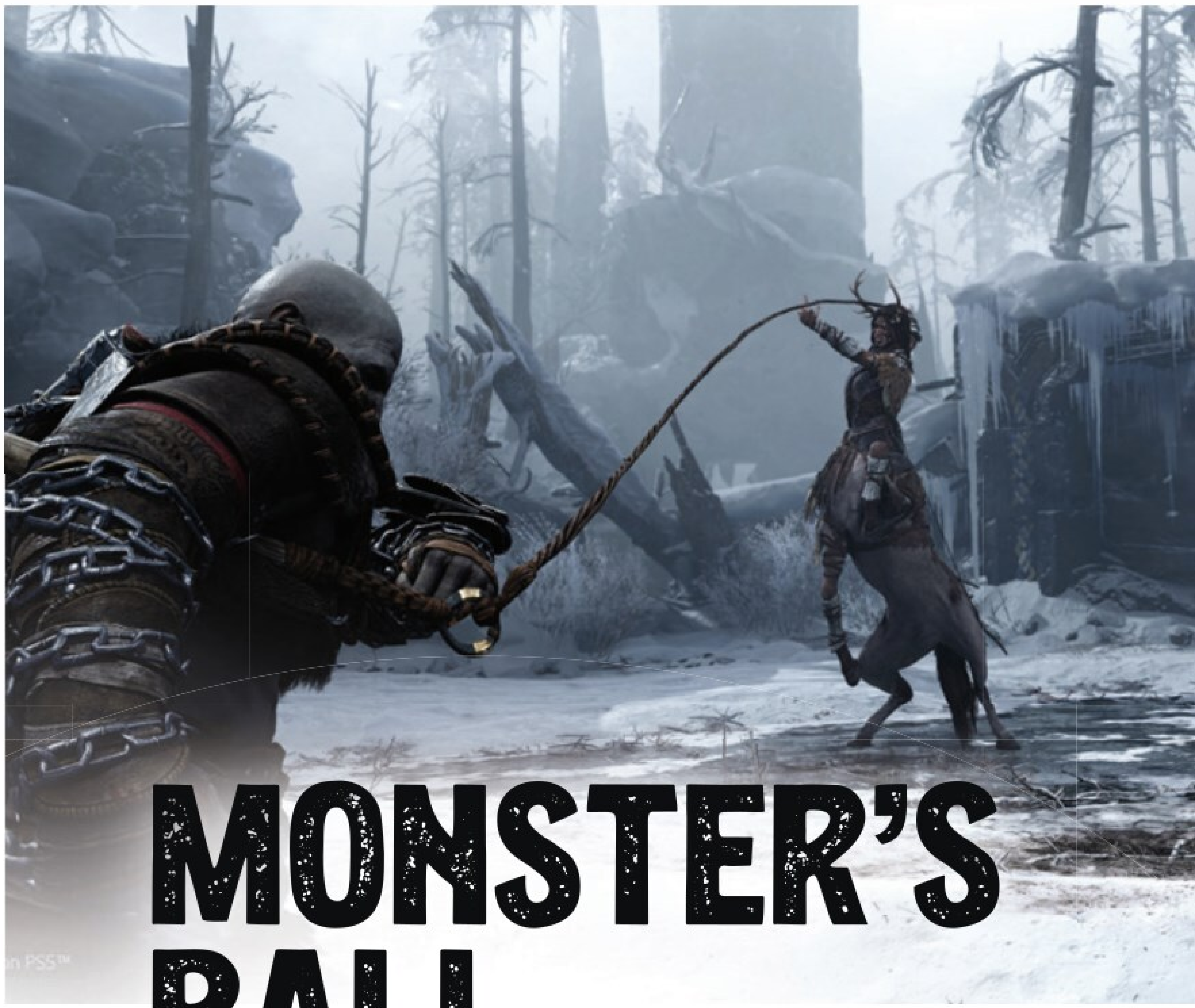
Seen enough Æsir to last you a lifetime? We'll be traveling to Vanaheim in Ragnarök, and hopefully, that means Vanir gods will be spotlighted. Respected for their connection to nature and magic, the Vanir are oft-neglected, amiable counterparts to the aggressive Æsir. It might come as no surprise, then, to learn that Freya was once a Vanir leader. At the request of Mimir, a former ambassador of the two factions, the Queen of the Valkyries married Odin hoping to end their bloody conflict. But as you can guess, that harmony was short-lived. Odin's insufferable paranoia pushed his wife away, triggering another war. Exiled to Midgard, Freya was virtually excommunicated from both the Æsir and Vanir families.

PLAYING WITH YOUR FOOD

Lead combat designers Mihir Sheth and Denny Yeh have over 17 years of God of War experience shared between them, and both played prominent roles in the previous game's success. The series' current direction is inspired by an old studio motto: Playing with your food.

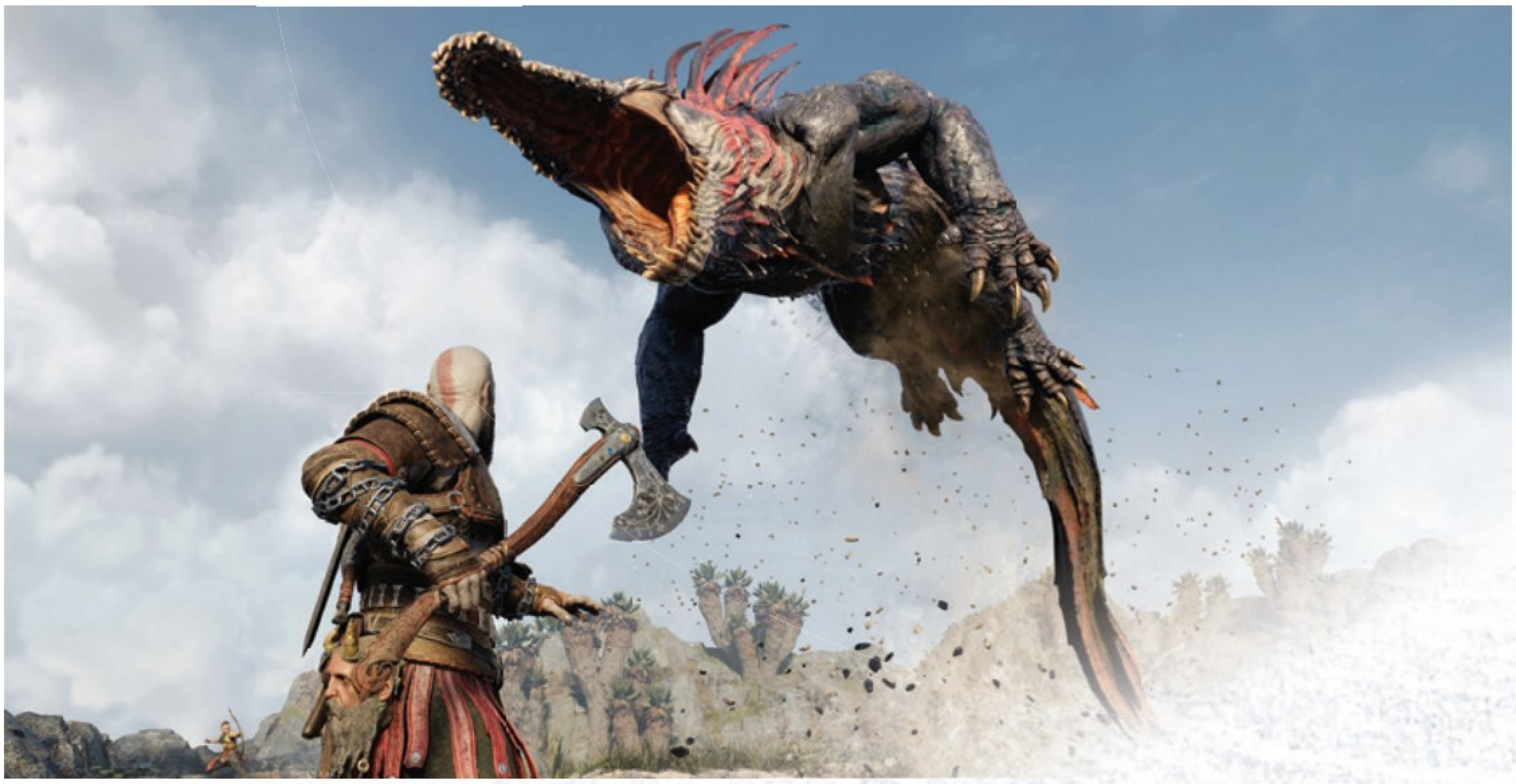
"That's an internal philosophy that we've had since back in the day," Sheth says. "Kratos plays with his food. We tried to create systems you want to engage with that are fun, very playful, lots of different routes. And when we looked at the combat in the last game, we were like, 'We can push this further; we can find new toys and ways of playing with enemies and strategies.' That's been the guiding principle more than anything else."

For seven minutes, I follow Kratos and Atreus across an enclosed arena chockful of explosive pots, advantageous high ground, wooden platforms, and bipedal lizards called Grims. The pair move in unison. Kratos pins a beast against the rock wall and then comes down on its skull with Olympian strength. Atreus fills stagger bars while locking enemies in place with sonic arrows. When a "Cursed" Grim tries to catch the bulky father off-guard, firing toxic bile from its swollen gullet, Kratos sidesteps the phlegm and masterfully deflects a second flurry with his arm shield. He throws his axe at a pot tucked between boxes, and the corner instantly erupts into flames, sending scaly appendages everywhere. Atreus demonstrates he's as much a powerhouse as his father, swinging at unsuspecting Grims with his bow while always repositioning to shoot. The two notice a few stragglers perched above, and in one fluid motion, the god-slayer latches onto the ridge with his Blades of Chaos, climbs the structure, stomps on a healthstone for extra flair, and launches the remaining creatures into the sky.



MONSTER'S BALL

God of War 2018's world was gorgeous and deadly. Revenants lay dormant in dilapidated temples, tatezelwurms ambushed unwary travelers from burrowing holes, and speedy wulvers were close-quarter menaces. Ragnarök's catalog seems to range from Asgardian soldiers and enormous wyverns to Grims and antlered centaurs known as Stalkers. Lead combat designers Mihir Sheth and Denny Yeh constantly emphasized the importance of enemy variety, so expect a bunch of fresh, grotesque faces to smash.



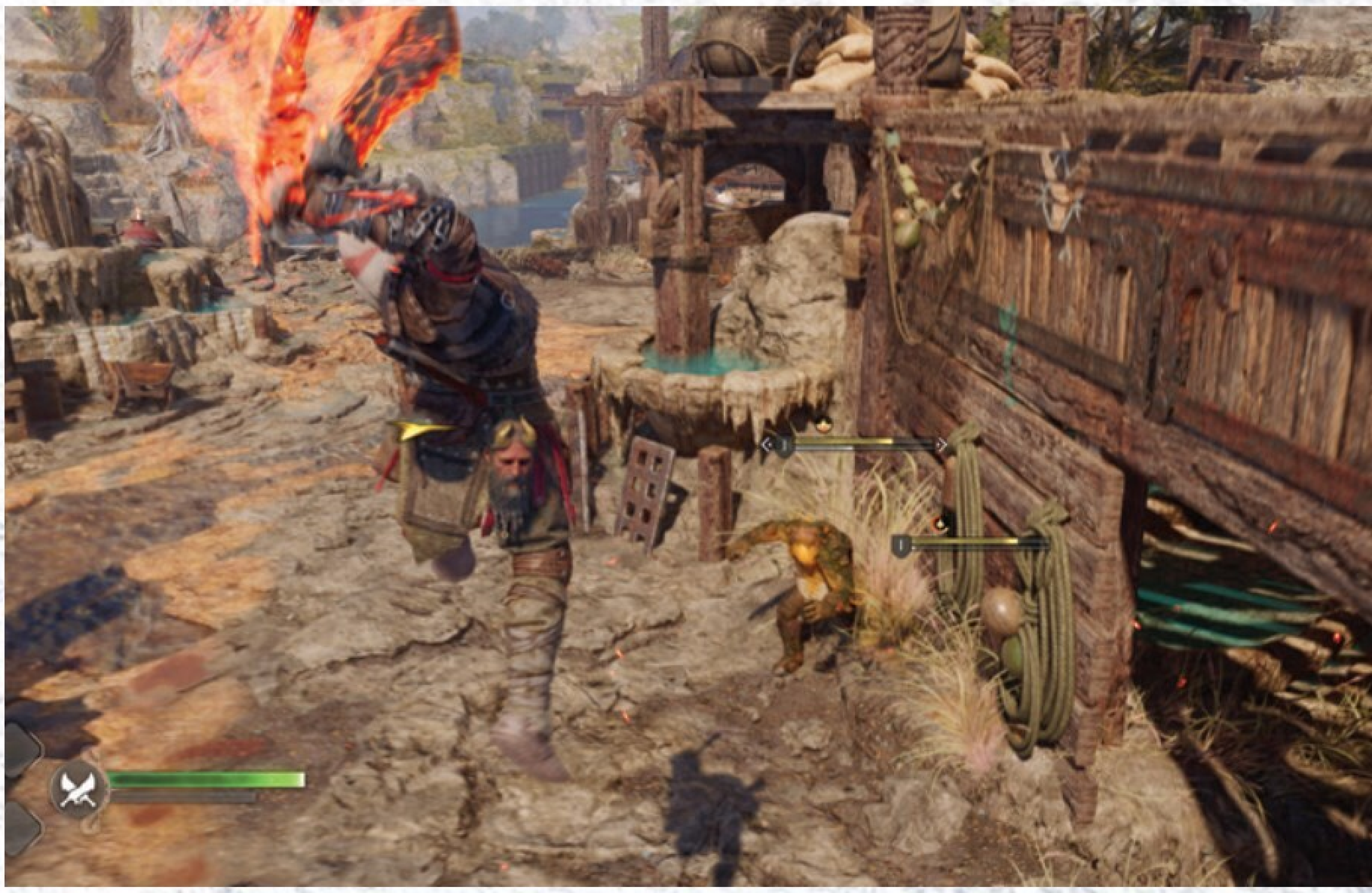
This adrenaline rush is tied to the versatility of Kratos' kit. The battle axe and chain blades increase maneuverability and power, but a misleadingly small-scale change to the Triangle button makes all the difference. "In the last game, if you pressed Triangle, you recalled the axe," Sheth says. "But if you already had the axe, nothing happened. If you had the Blades of Chaos and you pressed Triangle, you just went back to the axe. We looked at that concept and wondered, 'What if you could do something a little bit different with that button – a whole new suite of moves.'"

Triangle attacks are officially called Weapon Signature Moves. Depending on whether you have the Leviathan Axe or Blades of Chaos readied, Kratos can infuse the sharpened steel with ice or fire. These elemental moves, called "Frost Awaken" and "Whiplash," do extra damage by freezing or incinerating aggressors.

The shield is revamped, too. Yeh walked me through the pros and cons of the new Dauntless and Stonewall Shields, occasionally reminding me that the team wanted players to tailor their gameplay to immediate needs. The Dauntless Shield is all about twitch reactions. By parrying at the last possible moment, Kratos' shield glows a menacing red, signaling the player can unleash a devastating smash that tosses and stuns enemies. Dissimilarly, the Stonewall Shield is for tank-lovers that prefer slower-paced bouts. Kratos can't parry when equipped with the Stonewall, so keeping it raised is crucial to surviving barrages. The more hits the Stonewall Shield takes, the more kinetic energy it absorbs. And once it's fully charged, players can bang the shield into the ground emitting a screen-wide pulse, knocking anything foolish enough to approach off its feet.

But all that protection comes at a cost. The Stonewall Shield becomes increasingly unstable as it takes damage, opening Kratos up to otherwise ineffective block-breaking blitzes. Yeh says Kratos will have access to other powerful shields but warned players not to bite off more than they could chew: "Maybe don't play with all your food, because there will be food that can eat you pretty easily."

Both designers confirm enemy aggression and lethality would be heightened on harder difficulties, but players still need to keep their wits about them regardless of selected settings. Old locations are periodically repopulated with more powerful fauna, and optional territories could be tough without a stronger crew. Yeh mentions that fans of realm tears will get a comparable sense of gratification from besting some of Ragnarök's formidable side content. There's no word on whether Kratos will obtain other primary weapons, but last year's trailer unveiled an elk runic summon for Atreus to ride, so, hopefully, we'll see other new abilities soon.



UNIVERSAL DESIGN

To top it all off, God of War Ragnarök comes with a whopping 60-plus accessibility options, from auto-sprinting down muddy roads to noticeable direction indicators for combat sequences. Above all, a deeper level of customization lets players fine-tune their own wintry apocalypse. PlayStation enthusiasts might recognize the phrase "Play has no limits" from a string of ads. Ragnarök's lead UX designer, Mila Parvis, echoed the same sentiments and voiced her dedication to centering players of all walks of life.

"This is a fantasy epic," Parvis says. "This is about a father and son. This is about fate and the Nine Realms. And the ability to go into that, regardless of your background, and be able to experience all this rich detail and history and story? That drives me every day."

A wide spectrum of consultants and testers, including veterans and blind players, helped Parvis' team concentrate on four key fields: Vision, hearing, motor skills, and cognitive understanding. And several impressive, new features currently cover those design goals. A high contrast mode allows players to apply specific colors to item types, character types, backdrops, and more to increase general visibility and lessen visual clutter. Audio cues coupled with captions indicate button prompts in the general area and hint toward puzzle-timing modifications. For example, skill shots – hitting objects mid-fall or swinging on an arc – are easily executed by accessing game settings and slowing down environmental targets. Without these handy adjustments, Ragnarök is prone to "blockers" or difficult interactive moments that can potentially inhibit progression and alienate players. Parvis says the most significant task was finding a healthy balance between God of War's intensity and enabling players to overcome challenges in meaningful ways.

Kratos and Atreus will encounter Durlin in Svartalfheim, but how he factors into their latest odyssey is still anyone's guess

A methodology called "dual channel" is pivotal to addressing this balance. The UX team's efforts ensure players receive sensory information in multiple forms – sonically, visually, and haptically. Furthermore, options from the 2018 game, mainly text and icon size customization, are back and more elaborate than before so that all the in-game writing is legible. Abilities like Spartan Rage, quick-turns, shield strikes, and even high-contrast palettes are triggerable with swipes on the DualSense controller's touchpad. And auto pickup makes heady battles more manageable, so replenishing health or rage meters with the respective stones in a given area won't require much thought. "Accessibility features are not just accessibility features," Parvis tells me. "They also help to improve the experience for everyone. Ragnarök is about moving into the next phase. For us, that meant including more people, making sure that people can customize more, and making sure that it's a comfortable play experience for everybody."

Camera navigation assistance orients the view towards current objectives, platforming can be automated, and controller visualization lets streamers share moment-to-moment button inputs with wider audiences. These are just a few of the options players can tweak. But Parvis still yearns to expand Ragnarök's overall accessibility. "60-plus features is tremendous to get to," she says. "I still think we can do better. I think we can push it further. But honestly, I feel like people will be excited to see just how many more players can play. And if I can push a feature to the point where one more player – just one more player – could play, then that would be the greatest thing in the world; to be able to see that one player and understand how that lets them connect with the community and connect with everyone."

GODSPEED

One word that resurfaced throughout my team conversations was "evolution." And contrary to popular belief, evolving doesn't mean abandoning the past; it means embracing it. When Kratos puts Baldur in a headlock during the final hour of God of War 2018, he whispers – mainly to himself – "The cycle ends here." These are the same words Zeus utters in God of War II, seconds after betraying his own son. Yet, when they slip from the Spartan's lips, you get the sense that, like the franchise and designers who tirelessly worked on it, he's evolved.

When I ask Williams what the sequel means to him, he humbly tempers expectations by saying, "I'm going to answer in a very silly way." And later, after voicing his eagerness for fans to play the game, he tells me, "An ending is just something new beginning." ■

It remains to be seen what Ragnarök's equivalent to 2018's Valkyries are. Only time will tell what kind of majestic, two-on-one duels await

GASPING FOR LIFE ON THE RED PLANET

IN *DELIVER US MARS*, A BROKEN HEART COULD STAND IN THE WAY OF HUMANITY'S LAST HOPE FOR SURVIVAL

BY ANDREW REINER

R

Rivers are drying up, food is scarce, and once beautiful blue skies are brown with pollution. Climate change has made Earth uninhabitable. We are on the verge of extinction. Our last hope is a faint flicker in the night sky. Deep in space, we've developed technology that could reverse the damage we've done to the planet. A woman named Kathy Johanson travels to Mars to discover why this life-saving technology is offline. But that's not her only intent. She's also searching for her estranged father on the red planet. Will Kathy be selfless and save humanity? Or will she be selfish and mend her broken heart?

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Frontier Foundry
DEVELOPER KeokeN Interactive **RELEASE** February 2

UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS

When the credits rolled in Deliver Us The Moon, released by KeokeN Interactive in 2018, I was satisfied by the narrative. It was one of those science-fiction experiences that concluded in a way that left room for thought and discussion yet delivered enough answers that it felt like a complete story. The announcement of a sequel picking up right where the last game left off surprised me.

"I've heard this a couple of times," says Koen Deetman, CEO, game director, and founder of KeokeN Interactive. "People were surprised that this indie title got a sequel. It's funny because when the principles of Deliver Us The Moon's universe started to rise, we had the aspiration to go further than just one game. We thought it would be a series or a franchise. Naturally, we had ideas for a sequel even while the development of Deliver Us The Moon was ongoing."

Deliver Us The Moon revolves around humanity developing large vessels called ARKs that could potentially undo the climate disaster we created on Earth. An organization called Outward hijacked these massive vessels and relocated them to Mars. Its intent is unknown. Communications with Outward are primarily nonexistent, although Kathy intercepted one from her father.

When Deliver Us Mars begins, Kathy is an astronaut in training, longing to discover if her father is still alive. In the first game, the lead character (an unnamed astronaut) never spoke a word, but that isn't the case with Kathy. She has plenty to say and is brought to life by English actress Ellise Chappell (most recently seen in Netflix's *Young Wallander*). Neil Newbon (Heisenberg in Resident Evil Village) voices her father. Deetman says players can expect to hear (and see) from many other characters. Some of these encounters will be in person, whereas others are holograms retelling moments from the past. The mystery of what happened to Outward and the ARKs unfolds mostly through these holographic sequences. Kathy's past comes to life in cutscenes and gameplay sequences. KeokeN Interactive wants to tell her whole story, from her childhood with her father to the life she thought she would lead before he vanished without a trace.

Kathy's ascension in the space program and eventual journey from Earth to Mars will be in the player's hands through what Deetman calls a "dramatic space shuttle launch sequence." We don't know if Kathy is the lone human on the shuttle, but she is never entirely alone. At her side is a floating robot named AYLA. This companion chirps like a dolphin in digital tones and functions as a second playable character. Kathy frequently communicates with the robot and can clearly understand its "beeps" and "boops." AYLA is used for various needs, like scouting ahead or decrypting a terminal she can't reach. AYLA also boasts a powerful light to illuminate darkened areas. Kathy's movements are handled from a third-person perspective, whereas AYLA's flight unfolds in first-person.

In my hands-on time with Deliver Us Mars, I'm immediately given a chance to control both characters. I see Kathy standing on Mars' surface. She's wearing a state-of-the-art spacesuit, vibrant white with sleek splashes of red. My eye immediately darts to a flashing red light on the suit's back right shoulder.

"I need oxygen, AYLA," Kathy says in a worried tone.

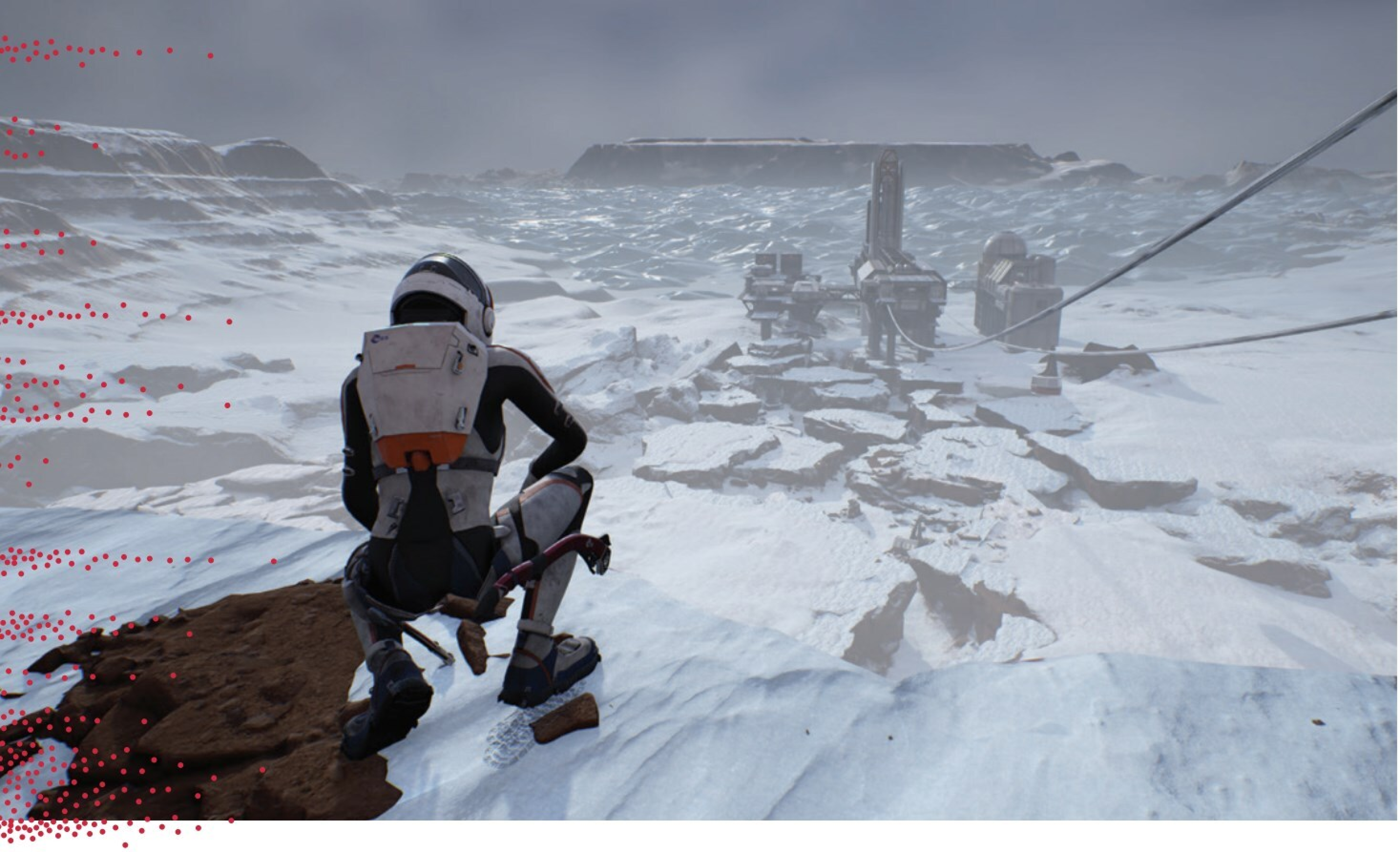
I take a few steps forward and notice Kathy's movements have an unnatural bounce due to Mars' lightened gravity. All around me is smooth red sand contrasted against jagged rocks. I speed up my movement to a sprint, which only depletes my oxygen quicker. I hear Kathy's

heartbeat quicken, and her vision blurs and fades. She collapses to the sand. Within just 30 seconds of playing, she's perished.

I attempt this sequence again, changing my vector to explore a different area in this sprawling rocky sea, but meet the same fate.

On my third try, I take control of AYLA. The robot rises 20 to 30 feet into the air, giving me a scenic look at the zone. I catch a glimpse of a metal door tucked within a cavern. I switch control back to Kathy and dash to the door, barely making it into an oxygenated chamber. Holding true to the first game, there will be plenty of puzzles and intense survival situations like this one. But that isn't all. As the mystery of Mars unfolds, Kathy navigates dangerous terrain in ways that will likely remind players of the Uncharted or Tomb Raider games.

OXYGEN
INSIDE



A HEART FOR EXPLORATION

After giving Kathy a moment to catch her breath, she returns to Mars' unforgiving surface, but this time through a back door leading to a sprawling quarry. Someone was digging for something here, but the who and what remains a mystery. What's impressive is how big this operation is. Giant cranes and excavators sit on the sides of the deep pit. Before I can explore the area, Kathy stands on a cliff, soaking it all in. The camera pans back to show the beauty of this area. The visual detail is significantly higher than in the prior game, delivering more detailed texture work, dynamic lighting, and more fluid character movements.

When control returns to the player, Kathy surveys the quarry. This moment delivers a short seek-and-find gameplay sequence of highlighting points of interest. These locations become waypoints, including an elevator and a landing platform holding a rover. I need to find a way down to the elevator, but I'm a good 100 feet above. To my left, I make out terrain that looks somewhat like a path but with sizable gaps between sections. Exploration is still the heart and soul of Deliver Us Mars, which now includes platforming. In this instance, Kathy must make perfectly timed leaps across a series of cliffs. The jumps aren't trivial, either. In one leap of faith, I am forced to sprint to gain just enough momentum to hurl Kathy across a chasm, her body banging on a cliff side as her arms barely grab onto the surface.

I then come to a rock wall that looks different than the others, with tiny grooves creating a stucco-like texture snaking down to the bottom of the quarry. Another precise jump sends Kathy soaring toward the wall, but a second before she collides, I press RT and LT simultaneously to bring out her pickaxes. She quickly plunges them into the wall, pebbles raining down as she dangles precariously before finding her footing.

The pickaxe movements are slow and deliberate, pushing the player to slowly alternate between strikes and moving Kathy's body to move along the wall. While Kathy can't move horizontally or up at a quick clip,

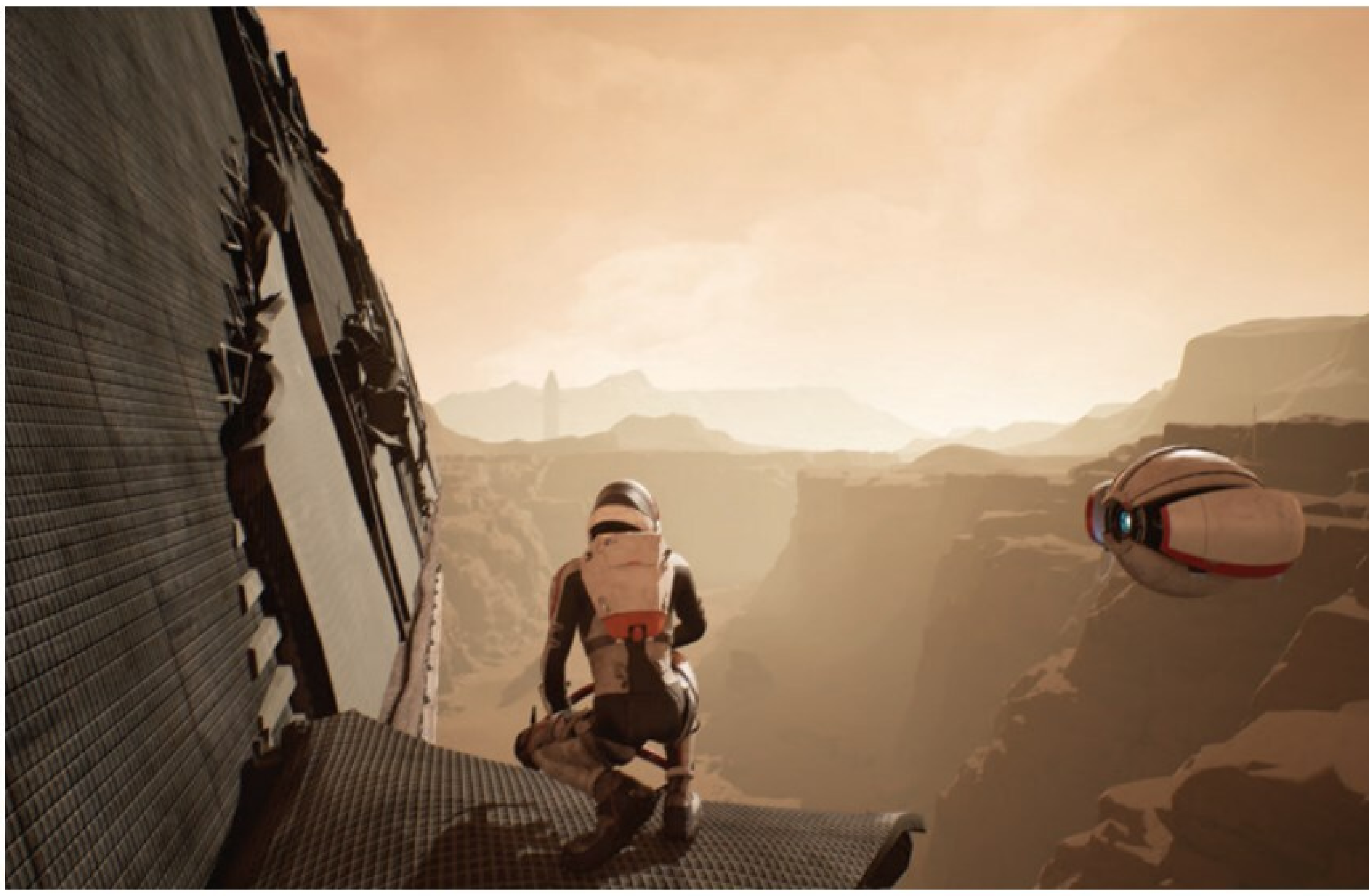
she can perform a trust fall to descend rapidly, and it's up to the player to determine how far she falls before re-engaging her pickaxe grip. The platforming and wall climbing work well and create a fair bit of excitement as I explore. Later in the game, I come across a similar sequence inside a facility that has me climbing up a shaft as Kathy is again in dire need of oxygen.

In another gameplay sequence, I take control of a rover for a short driving sequence through a winding cavern. The environment is sizable. Each of the rover's wheels moves independently when I hit little bumps. KeokeN wants players to check out its realistic physics, given the number of inclines (or jumps) I see along the way. The rover controls well, delivering a nice change of pace after the perilous on-foot section. For all of the platforming and puzzles, KeokeN doesn't want players to tire of repetition – a problem of the first game – and escalates the complexity of challenges as the adventure unfolds.

I don't see any water in my demo levels, but scuba diving is another new gameplay element. Along with the red sands of Mars, Kathy will explore icy valleys, colony ship interiors, Earth, and other locations.

"People wanted [Deliver Us The Moon] to be longer," says Deetman. "So, this one is longer than that. Since that was our debut, we were somewhat limited in how we could deliver the narrative. With Deliver Us Mars, we can excel more and explore more possibilities. Technically, this is a massive step for us as a studio – being able to do motion capture and facial animations, too. When players finish the game, I hope they have a lasting [impression] of the narrative and how it emotionally touched them. If you are a space lover, I hope we give you a view of Mars that you believe could be true, given the realism we applied to it."

Deliver Us Mars launches in February, giving you a little time to play through Deliver Us The Moon to see why this continuation is so unexpected and exciting. ■



sisters in

Wyrms

BATTLE ALLIES

Combat is the best place to start exploring this dualism. While plenty of other elements make up Soulstice, during my time with acts one and two (out of five in total), it became clear that combat is the star. In a fight, my focus was mainly on Briar. Mashing out her combos and switching between various weapons are the essential elements of the game's battles. Meanwhile, Lute is partially controlled by AI and will contribute lower damage of her own.

But you can't put her out of mind entirely. Some enemies are invulnerable until Lute uses one of her two color-coded auras. The auras only stretch so far, making close-up fighting a necessity. Luckily, Lute is also the key to blocking, leaving an opening for Briar to dodge out of the way of taking damage and setting her up for parries, allowing Briar to devastate an enemy. "We imagined that if Briar is attacking, she can't defend herself," says Marco Mortillaro, lead game designer at Replay Games. Instead, she has Lute to do it.

The sisters have their own skill trees, but each constantly interacts with the other. And when players combine the siblings' powers, they also build up their Unity gauge, which allows them to access the powerful but dangerous abilities granted to them as a chimera. In this way, combining the sisters' efforts is a constant balancing act, making fights feel satisfyingly complex and contributing to their narrative closeness.

TWO AS ONE

This dynamic is why Soulstice remains a single-player game rather than a co-operative experience. Creative director Fabio Pagetti resisted the idea of thinking of the sisters as separately controlled. Instead, by simultaneously controlling both characters, it's clear that they're inextricable from each other – emotionally, narratively, and even physically. "We had this base image of Lute hugging Briar," says Mortarillo. "We really wanted them to be near one another during the whole game. If we had to do a co-op experience, we couldn't do that because the second player would have needed to control Lute and move around freely."

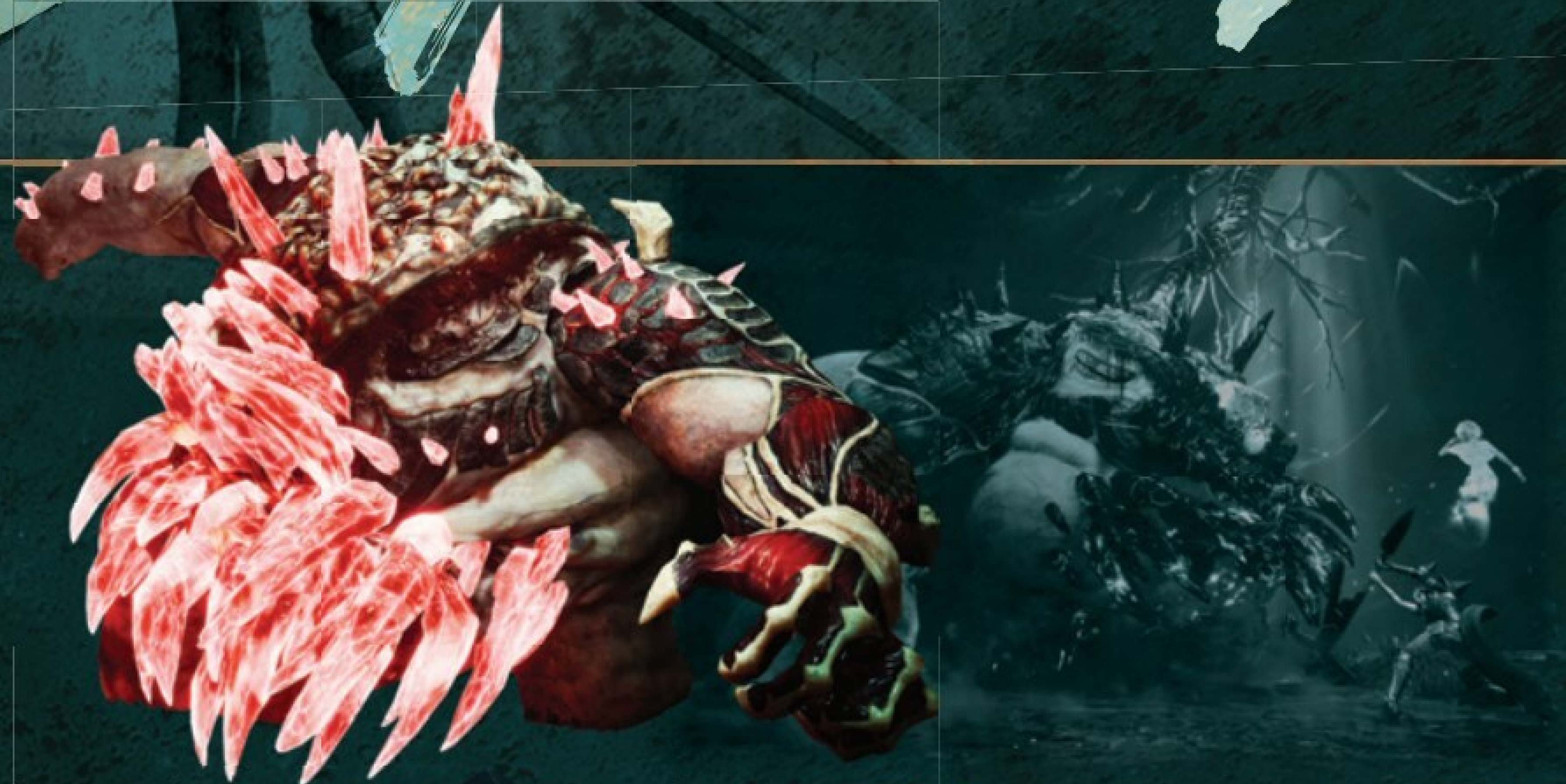
Replay Games isn't ready to say how exactly Lute came to be a spirit hovering over Briar's shoulder. But while Lute's ghostly concept was an early choice, the other character in the pair wasn't always the Briar she is now. Originally, Pagetti had sketched the young proto-Lute accompanied by a giant, undead knight.

But when working on the combat, they realized that they wanted to create something "very quick, very fast-paced," says Pagetti. For that, the hulking knight wasn't the best fit. "We needed a very athletic character ... and in the end, we had the idea to have two girls working together."

That focus on getting combat right also influenced the game in other ways. The studio had not previously worked on a hack 'n' slash and wanted to devote time to iterating on every move. "We took some design decisions on other parts of the game to help with that," says Mortillaro. For instance, the interconnected but individual levels were chosen over an open world format to cut complexity, leaving them more time to focus on Briar's many fighting abilities.

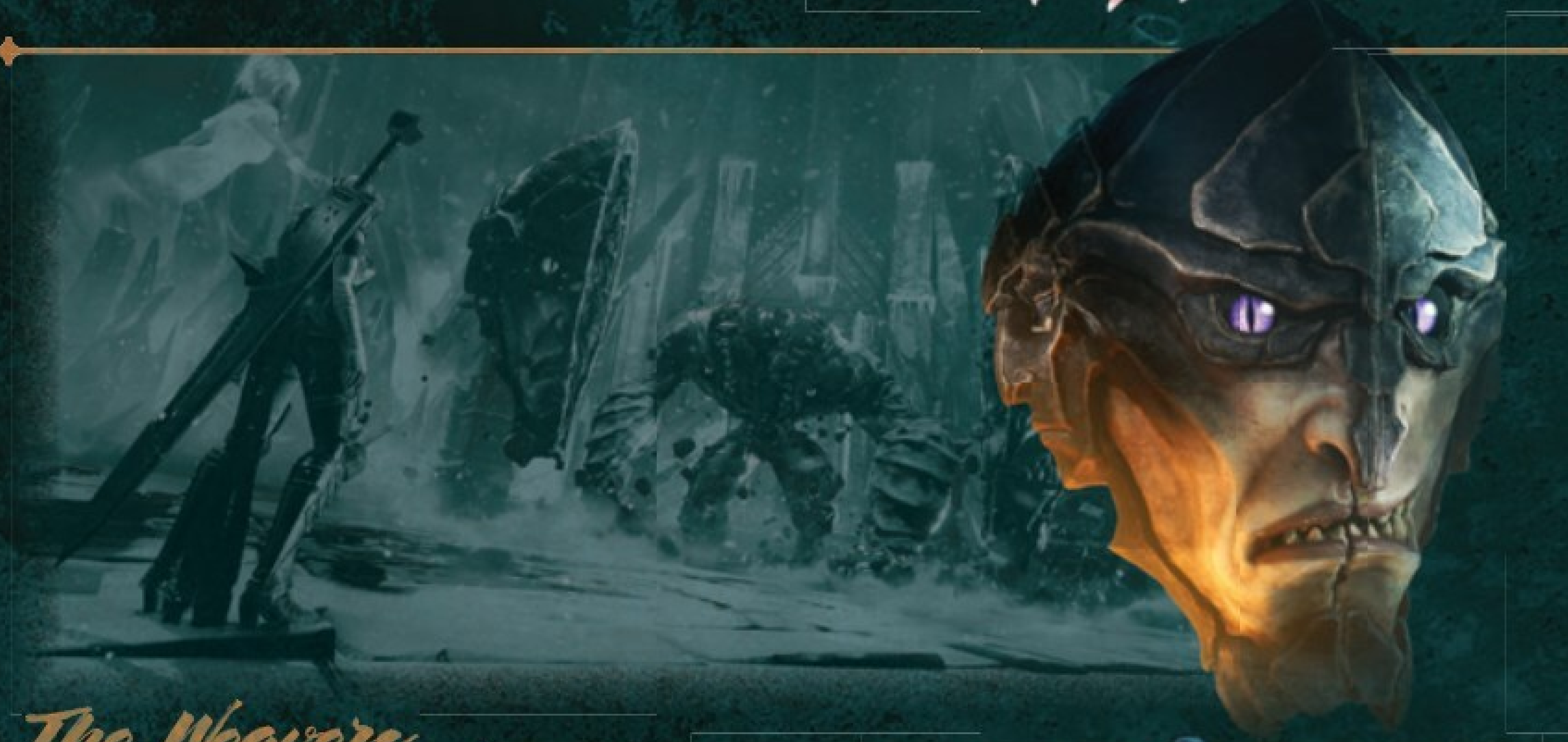
Boss Spotlight

Abomination



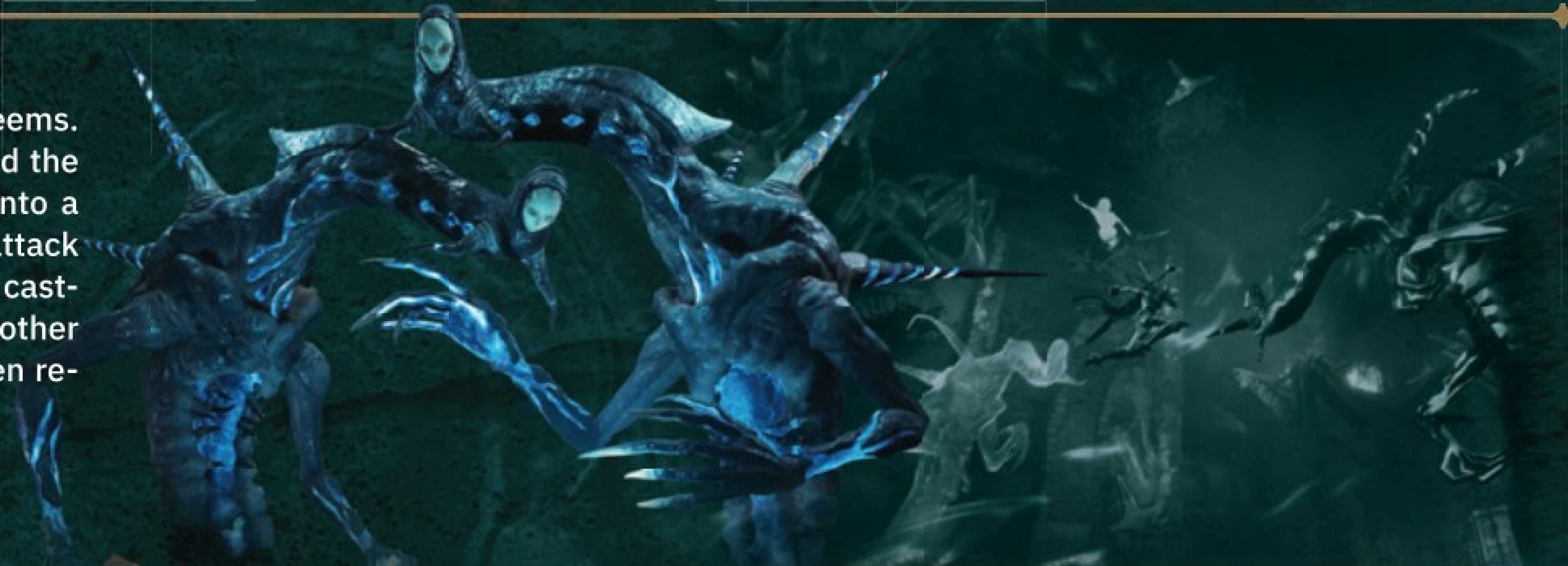
The Abomination is a twisted body, corrupted by Possession and by the crystals sprouting from its flesh. Those crystals will protect it from attack, unless you find and exploit its soft weak spot. Even then, the Wraiths possessing it must be destroyed quickly when they appear, or they'll heal its wounds.

Colossus



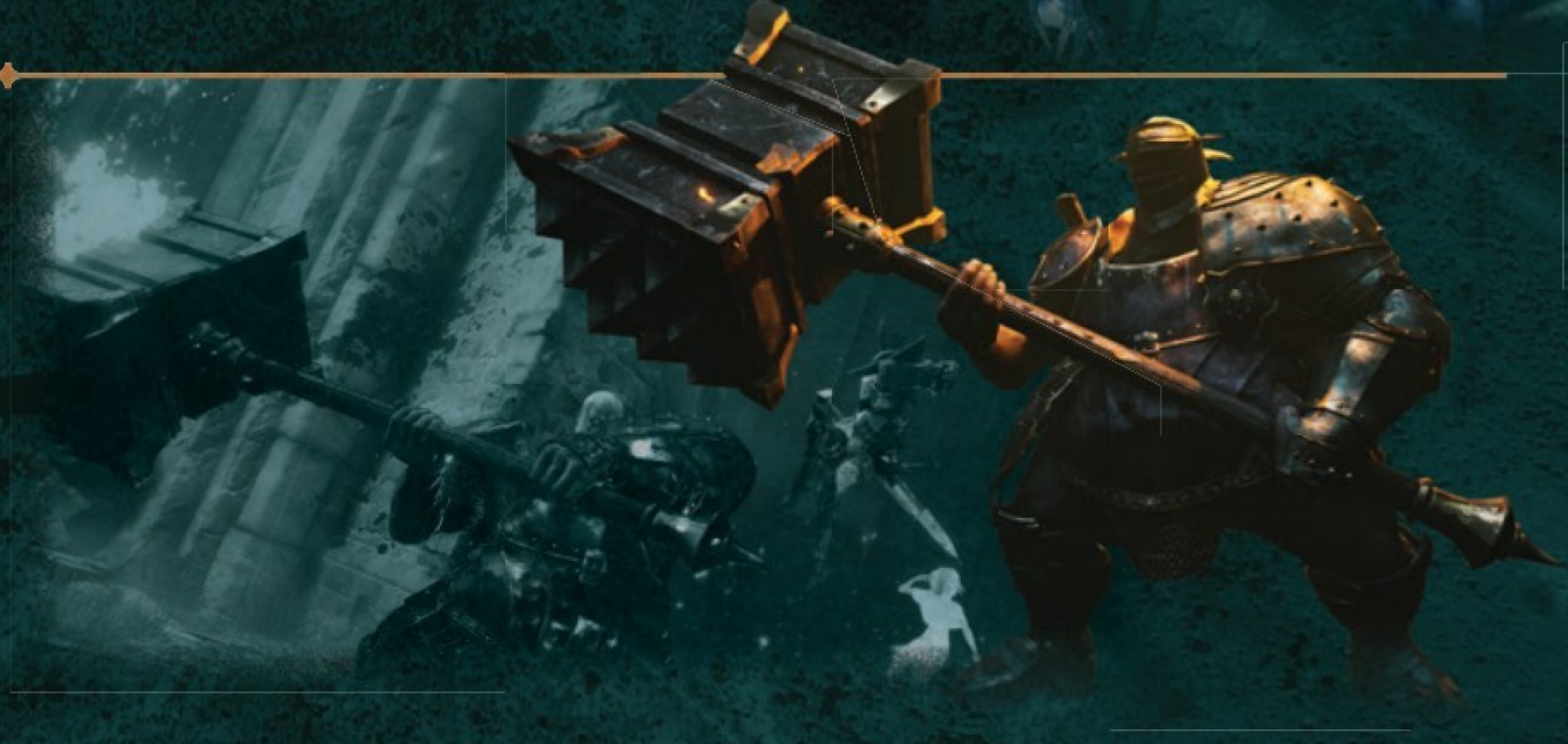
Chimera like Briar and Lute struggle against Transcendence, a mysterious fate worse than death. When other Chimera are brought in to help with the tear in reality Transcend, they morph into enemies who will turn on the sisters and hunt them down across the city. The Colossus is one of these enemies, and it won't be shaken off easily.

The Weavers



Not everything in Ildan is what it seems. The Weavers are Wraiths that can bend the sisters' sense of reality, luring them into a trap. Once they do, they team up to attack together, fading in and out of view and casting powerful spells. They can summon other enemies and slow Briar down, and even revive one another.

Champion

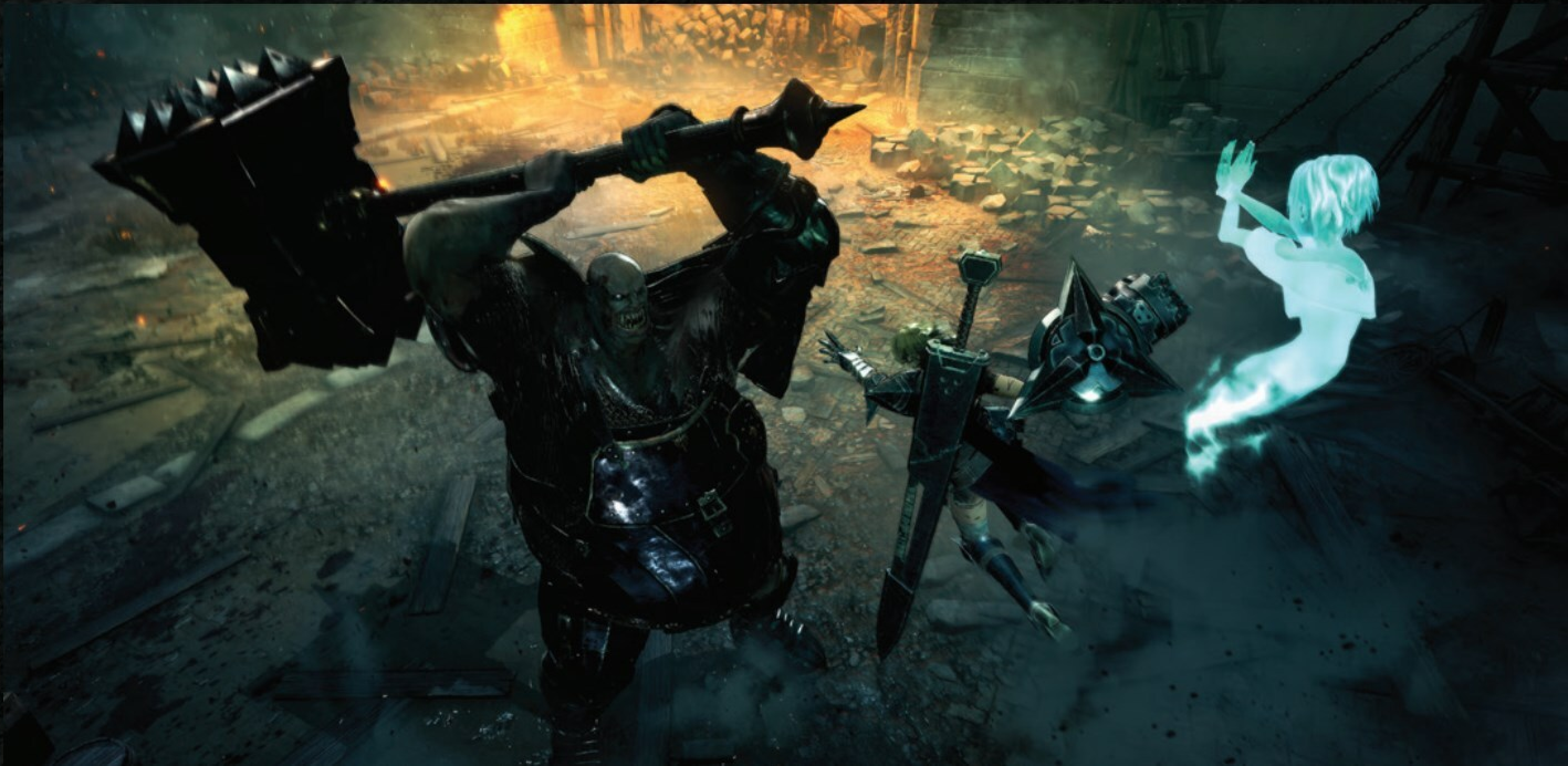


The Champion is the first major test of strength for the sisters after they arrive in the city. Don't be deceived by its size, it can swing that hammer fast – so get used to Lute and Briar's blocking and dodging combo.

COMPANION

In regular fights, my focus could stay on Briar with the occasional sideline to ensure she got the right help from Lute. These fights weren't very difficult. However, for those who prefer action games to encourage digging in and understanding all the possible combos, the scores at the end of the chapter successfully lit up the "I could do better" urge in my brain.

Boss fights were a slightly different affair. They need more cooperation from the sisters and therefore more focus from the player. The bosses gather together all the chapter developments that preceded them, testing the pair's new skills. After learning about Lute's parrying and blocking abilities in act one, for example, a monstrous giant archer appears to make sure you really understand it. Several of these bosses take repeated tries to learn and differentiate from the usual battles. They're also an indication of where dualism runs deeper through the game than in the combat alone. All of the main bosses also have two phases, requiring both of Lute's auras to defeat. And combining Briar and Lute's skills is also necessary for the sections that break up Soulstice's combat.



VARIETY

Every element of Soulstice is constantly being built upon, adding complexity. For example, when exploring, Lute's aura ability is necessary for making some platforms tangible. But she can only use that power for so long, so Briar has to be quick. At first, if I made a mistake, it was only necessary to wait a few seconds before trying again. Later, Lute's field may have activated a mine alongside the platform, hurting Briar unless the timing was right.

At other times, Lute's fields are needed for puzzles, like tracking down and destroying crystals blocking the path, or unlocking echoes of what happened when the tear opened over the city.

"We knew that we needed to have these kind of cool-off sessions between one combat and the other," says Mortillaro. By switching these moments between platforming, exploration, puzzle-solving, and narrative exposition, there's a wide variety of ways that the sisters interact with the world and one another. But players who particularly enjoy one element of the game can further find additional healing items and currency or take on the additional combat challenges hidden around the city. It mainly works to keep things interesting, but at times the areas themselves can feel repetitive as the ruined buildings and dark sewers that make up Ildan are somewhat indistinguishable. While helpful in cementing their relationship, the ambient dialogue between the sisters can also repeat itself, particularly while trying to explore all the nooks and crannies of a level.

These minor issues aside, Soulstice's widely embedded, sibling-driven dualism is an exciting twist on the hack 'n' slash genre that's likely to be particularly enjoyable for those who want to sink into its complex combat come release day on September 20. ■

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POKÉMON SCARLET AND VIOLET

Welcome to the Paldea region

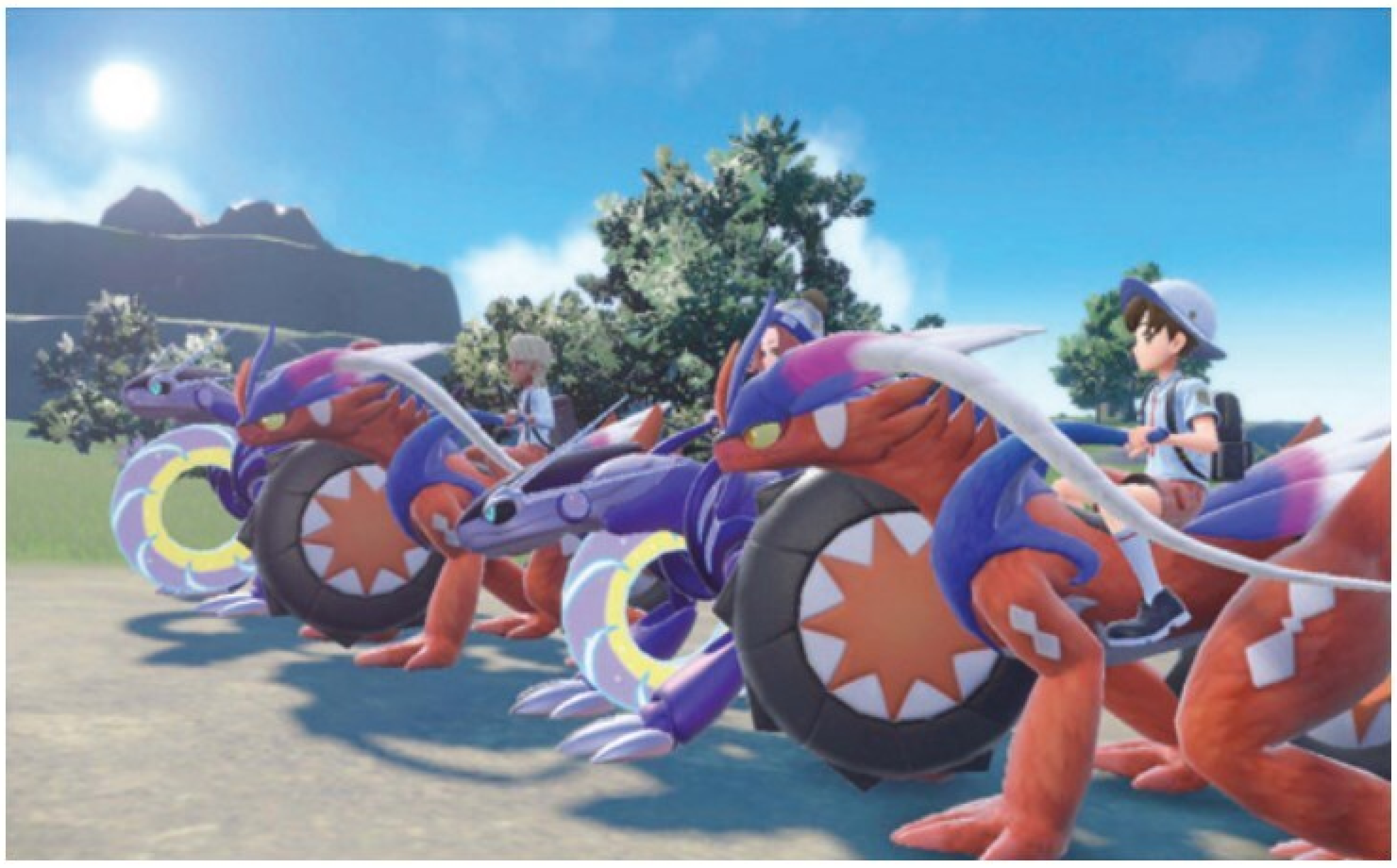
As we await the first fully open-world mainline Pokémon RPG, developer Game Freak dropped a ton of new information to give us a sense of the adventure we'll embark on. We now know a lot more about the region of Scarlet and Violet, plus the Pokémon, characters, stories, and phenomena we'll encounter during our time with the game.

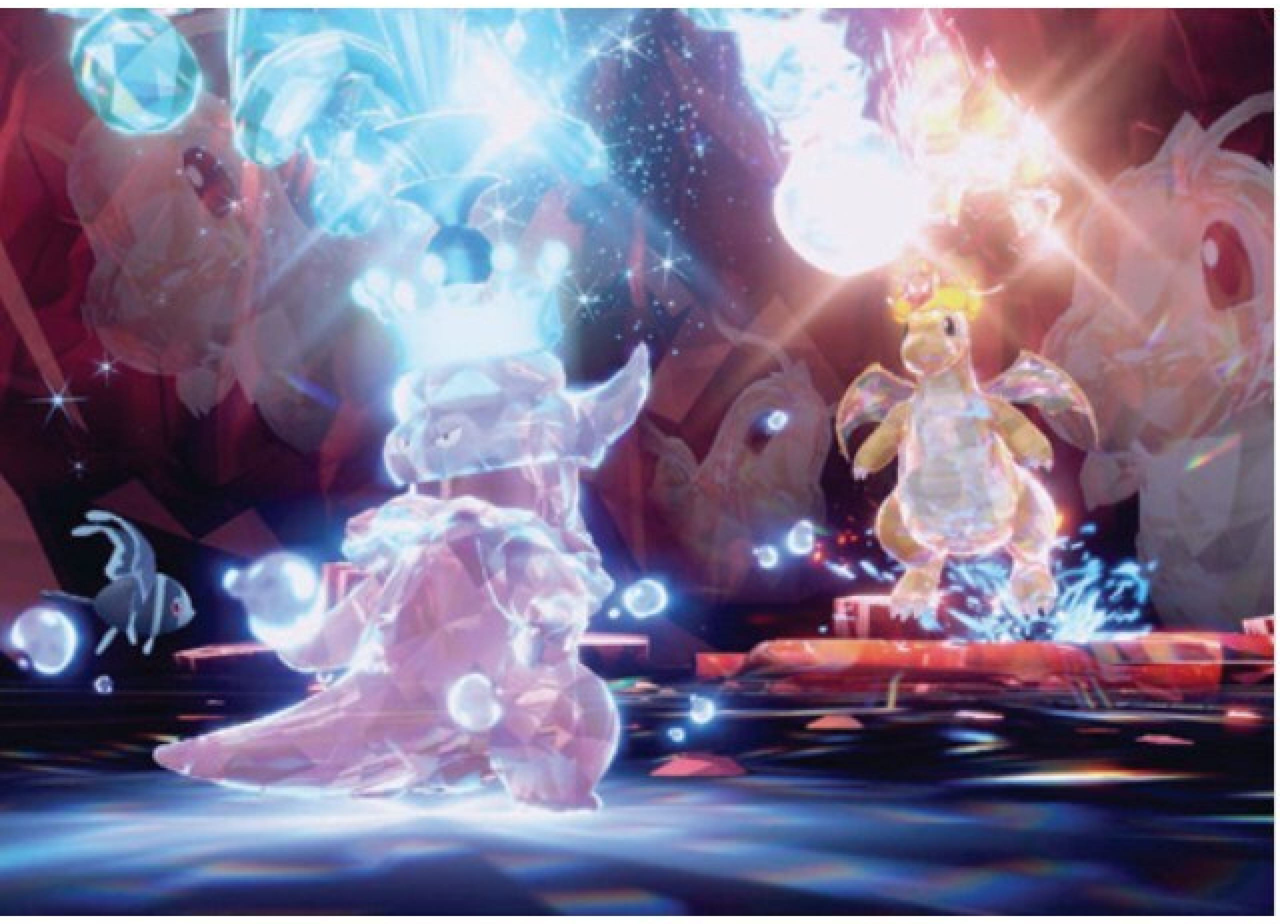
Pokémon Scarlet and Violet takes place in the Paldea region, which appears to be based on Spain and Portugal. This massive region hosts lakes, mountains, wastelands, farming villages, and port towns. At the region's center is its largest city, Mesagoza. Based on the version you play, your trainer attends either Naranja Academy or Uva Academy (Spanish for "orange" and "grape," respectively). Each academy features unique uniforms, emblems, and other details.

At the start of their journey, players receive a Rotom Phone, complete with a Pokédex app, a map of the Paldea region, and more. As you set out, you can participate in three grand stories; one story features the traditional eight-gym conquest, but this time, you can complete the gym challenges in any order. Game Freak hasn't released any information about how level-scaling works, but hopefully the ability to challenge gyms in any order bodes well for a balanced experience no matter the route you take.

The Pokémon inhabiting the Paldea region include a mix of old favorites, regional variants, and new species. You're likely to encounter familiar creatures like Growlithe, Haunter, Pineco, and plenty more. But there's also the new Paldean Wooper, which takes the Gen-II favorite and makes it land-dwelling with a brown hue and poison capabilities. We also learned of two all-new Pokémon: Cetitan, an Ice-type with high attack and defense, and Fidough, an adorable bread-based Fairy-type that humans keep around to help with baking because its breath has yeast.

We already knew about the two Legendary Pokémon, Koraidon and Miraidon, featured on the Scarlet and Violet box arts. But we learned even more about their seemingly larger roles in these adventures. One of these Legendary creatures joins the player on their journey as a partner. They can change forms to suit different traversal methods, allowing the player to sprint through flatlands, swim across rivers and lakes, or jump from mountains and buildings and glide toward their destination.





Koraidon and Miraidon aren't the only Paldean Pokémon who can change forms, though. As with all recent Pokémon generations, Gen IX introduces a new gimmick that affects how Pokémon can boost their powers. The Paldea region features Terastallizing, an in-battle transformation that causes them to shine like gems and become more powerful. Some creatures even temporarily change type when they Terastallize. This shift is determined on a Pokémon's Tera type, which varies by each individual creature; one Eevee could stay as a Normal-type when they Terastallize, while others could be Grass- or Water-types when they transform.

Terastallized Pokémon also play a key role in one of the multiplayer modes of Scarlet and Violet. Up to four players can join to explore Paldea or participate in Tera Raid Battles, where they fight a powerful Terastallized Pokémon. Unlike the Max Raid Battles of Sword and Shield, Tera Raid Battles aren't turn-based, meaning players need not wait for their teammates to attack to perform an action. If the team can take down the creature, they can catch it.

If you'd rather enjoy a more traditional single-player Pokémon experience, don't worry, because Scarlet and Violet still has a ton of NPCs with whom you can interact. In addition to the already-revealed Professor Sada and Professor Turo, we learned of several additional characters we'll meet in Paldea. Clavell is the director of the academy you attend. Mr. Jacq is your homeroom teacher who instructs you on Pokémon biology. Jacq is also the developer of the Pokédex app on your Rotom Phone. In addition to classmates Arven and Penny, we met Grusha. He's not only a professional snowboarder, but the gym leader of the Glaseado Gym. As you might imagine from his profession, Grusha is an Ice-type gym leader who has the newly announced Cetitan as his partner Pokémon. This look at our first gym leader made me excited to see the other seven in the near future.

Though August revealed a ton of new information about Pokémon Scarlet and Violet, we still have a lot to learn about the Paldea region ahead of its November release date. Hopefully, the next mainline entry takes lessons from games like Sword and Shield and Legends: Arceus to create the Pokémon game players have been dreaming of since the series' inception. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Game Freak **RELEASE** November 18

SOULFRAME

Princess Mononoke the RPG?

Digital Extremes has been riding high off Warframe's success for almost a decade. The 2013 free-to-play RPG continues to thrive, thanks to the timely releases of expansions, a steady drip of new content, and a fiercely loyal player base. At this year's TennoCon 2022 press conference, the developer announced two sizable additions for Warframe: The Duviri Paradox expansion, which brings color-changing and mood-driven landscapes to the experience, and the Veilbreaker quest, which gives players control of a Grineer soldier. Digital Extremes also said it is closing in on a public test for crossplay, cross saves, and a mobile version.

The biggest announcement of the night, however, was a new game called Soulframe. The naming convention of "frame" matters, as this project is a free-to-play action hybrid-MMORPG. The focus is fantasy, pulling heavily from iconic motion pictures.

"With Soulframe's worldbuilding and thematic elements, we are really looking to go back to our childhood favorites like *Never Ending Story* and those elaborate fantasy worlds," Soulframe's creative director Geoff Crookes said in an official blog post. "Our team has a fond love for [director Hayao] Miyazki and *Princess Mononoke*, where there are recurring concepts of nature and humanity colliding, and we'll be exploring a lot of those themes through our lens while playing with ideas of restoration and exploration."

The *Princess Mononoke* comparison is evident in Soulframe's first teaser trailer. In one shot, we see a giant moose lumber to a creek for a drink. This beast has sizable horns with red eyes painted on them. Trinkets that look a little like Christmas ornaments dangle from these horns and help give the beast a majestic fantasy quality. Deeper into the water lies a man, naked, except for his right arm, made of gray metal with extravagant engravings and cosmetic touches that look expensive and powerful. The man rises to the words, "Find your spirit, your grace renewed, and return to earth, her power true."

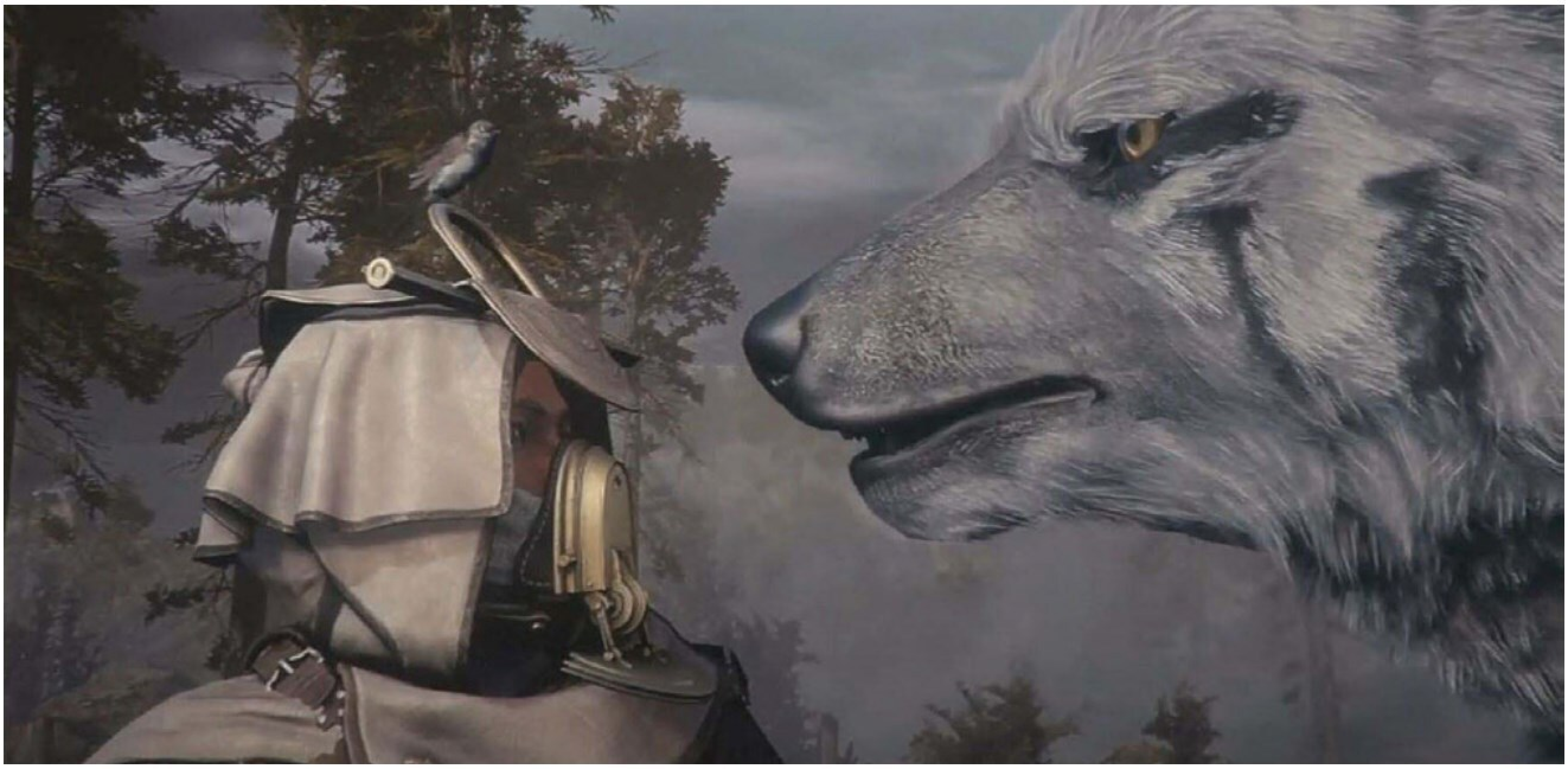
The following clip shows the man again, fully clothed with a cape and sword, standing confidently in front of three heavily armored warriors. He lowers his metal hand toward the blade, and it comes to life with magical energy. He draws it and raises it above his head, giving us a good look at a clunky, Darth Vader-like respirator covering his mouth and nose. He strolls toward the enemies and cuts down two of them with lightning-quick slashes. He pauses in front of the third foe and snaps two fingers on his metal hand. As the snap echoes through the valley, a bird launches into the chest of the final adversary, knocking them back far enough for the man to jab his sword into the Earth to create a slight tremor that turns the foe to stone.

The trailer's final shot shows the man and his little finch-like bird approach a giant wolf. The implication is that they freed this monstrous beast, which looks at them with confident and reassuring eyes. Could this be a mount that players will get to use for transportation and perhaps battle?

We don't know when we'll have these questions answered as Soulframe is still early in development and without any sort of release time. But the teaser trailer is effective in its pitch, painting a beautiful fantasy landscape that makes the player character look powerful, mysterious, and ready for adventure.

BY ANDREW REINER

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** TBA
PUBLISHER Digital Extremes
DEVELOPER Digital Extremes **RELEASE** TBA



THE LOST WILD

Survival of the fittest

With The Lost Wild, Great Ape Games hopes to restore the mystique, majesty, and intimidation of the most awe-inspiring creatures to ever roam Earth: dinosaurs. This first-person survival horror game tasks you with staying alive in a world teeming with extinct predators as a largely defenseless – and extraordinarily unlucky – human.

Despite its prehistoric cast, The Lost Wild unfolds in the modern day. You control an investigative reporter named Saskia stranded on a Japanese island dotted with abandoned facilities. Somehow, dinosaurs have returned and now hold dominion over the island, from herbivores like Stegosaurus to the carnivorous Allosaurus, among many others. Your only lifeline is a mysterious voice communicating through your radio who serves as a guide of sorts. Throughout your harrowing journey, you'll traverse forests and explore ruined structures to uncover clues about the island's past and learn how these critters found their way into the era of man.

Survival via resourcefulness is the name of the game, which primarily means avoiding contact with your scaly neighbors as best you can. You won't be maiming or killing dinosaurs like the second coming of Turok. Instead, you carefully sneak through areas or use nonlethal weaponry to intimidate and repel pursuing dinos. Scavenging locations for items such as flares plays a big part in the gameplay loop, and you can also craft makeshift tools from the parts you collect. By using the surroundings to your advantage, you can create distractions to throw off, say, a pack of raptors hotly pursuing your trail. Despite having some form of protection, Great Ape describes The Lost Wild as a cat-and-mouse game where you'll never truly feel powerful. You will always be the prey.

Dinosaurs behave realistically, with Great Ape emphasizing the game's systemic A.I., allowing them to act like wild animals, not monsters. They may react aggressively to your presence or become curious to the point that you can even bond with certain species, which may benefit your survival. Dinosaurs possess a sense of self-preservation and also adapt to different situations, suggesting you may experience a few instances of muttering to yourself, "clever girl." Observing their behavior is key to determining the best way to deal with an animal you must slip past.

The island itself follows a "Hub and Spoke" design; it's open enough to feature multiple paths and plenty of landmarks while still allowing deliberately paced linear storytelling. What that means exactly is unclear for now, but given the game's projected 6-10 hour playtime, we wouldn't expect to wade through a gigantic landmass littered with points of interest. If trailers are any indication, Lost Wild's world appears gorgeously rendered, boasting exceptional lighting that gives the fantastical adventure a wonderful sheen of realism.

Great Ape Games describes The Lost Wild as a blend of the cinematic flair of *Jurassic Park*, the tense gameplay of Alien: Isolation, with the narrative style of Half-Life and Firewatch. It already looks incredibly promising. Unfortunately, we won't be playing it for a good while. The game is currently in pre-alpha and isn't projected to launch until 2024 at the earliest. When it does arrive, Great Ape plans to launch on PC via Steam as well as unspecified consoles.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBA)
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Great Ape Games
DEVELOPER Digital Extremes
RELEASE 2024

MOONBREAKER

Miniature mayhem

Hearthstone with miniatures. It's an oversimplification, but if the idea captures your imagination, you recognize why the developers at Unknown Worlds think they've hit on something special. Best known for Subnautica, the team has been quietly working on a wholly digital miniatures game for the last five years. Built to emulate the collectability, customization, and tactical sophistication of the best tabletop miniature games, Moonbreaker aims to nail the magic and appeal of the real-life hobby, but with some of the approachability inherent to video games. After over an hour checking out the result, I'm convinced Unknown Worlds is onto something.

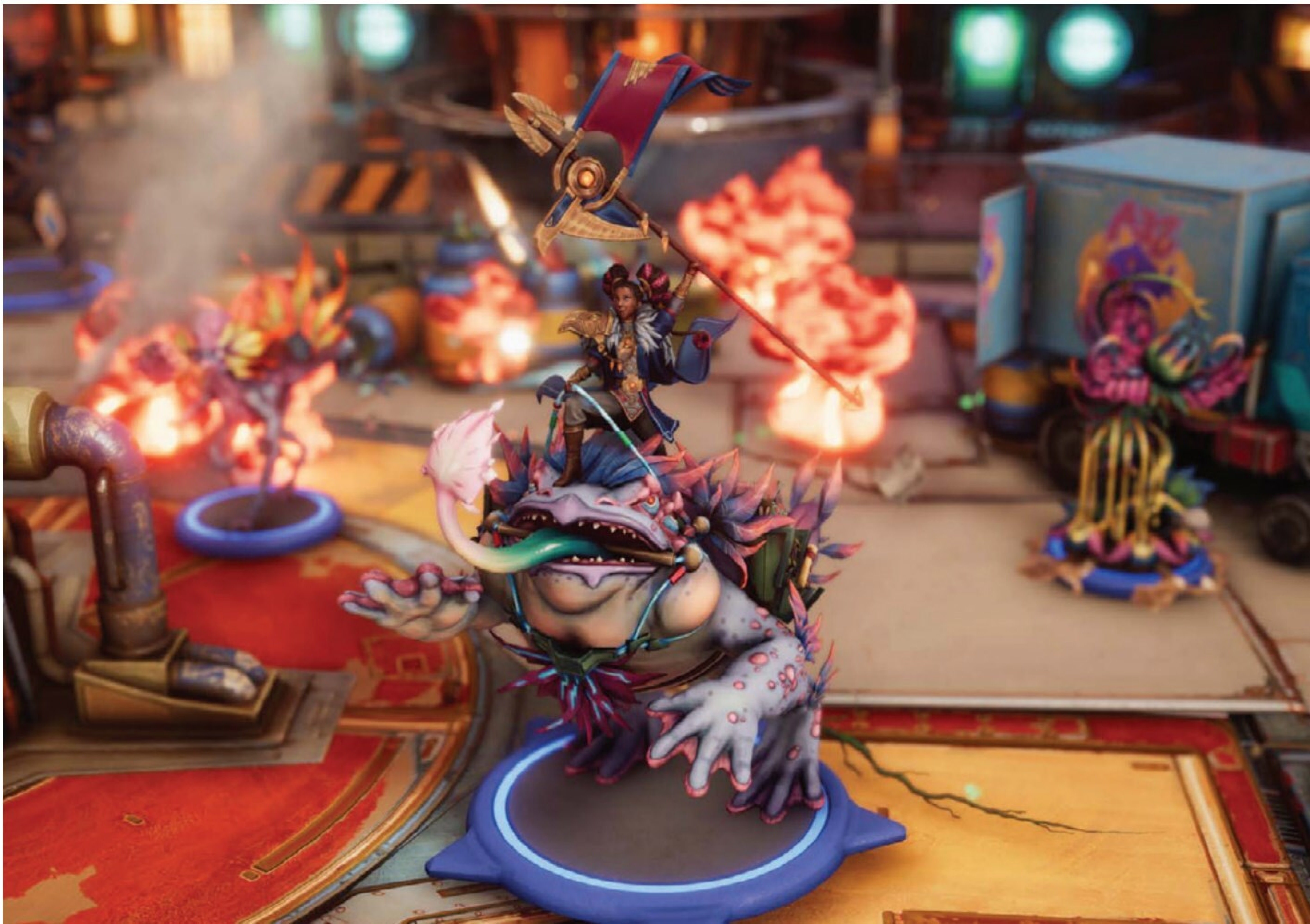
Set in an original sci-fi/fantasy universe built in partnership with celebrated author Brandon Sanderson, Moonbreaker explores a remote distant solar system called The Reaches, in which a multitude of moons carve intricate orbits around each other, each housing unique cultures and peoples. A rare resource called Cinder hides deep in the mantle of these moons and fuels the abilities of superpowered individuals called Solars. To survive, these Solars must consume more Cinder, so they gather a crew to their sides and set forth on their ships to gather the precious substance.

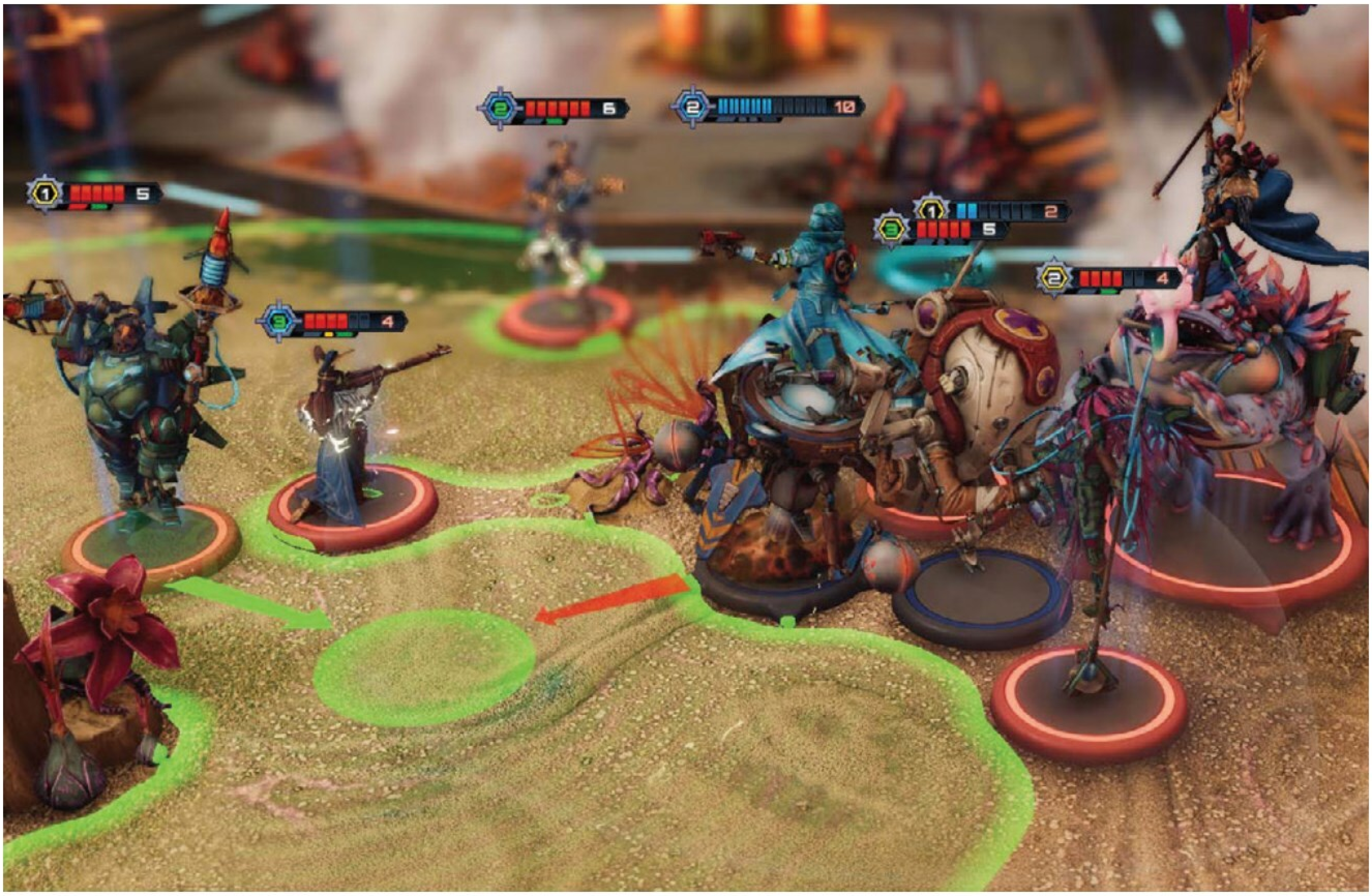
With that setup, players are dropped into the shoes of one of these ship captains. The fiction seems to borrow from sci-fi like *Firefly* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* and more terrestrial nods to properties like *Pirates of the Caribbean*. In the tense, one-vs-one battles (against AI or human players), you pit your captain and up to ten crew against your opponent and aim to take down the enemy captain by whatever means possible.

That fictional framework offers an excuse for Unknown Worlds to accomplish its real task – a massive and varied collection of incredibly detailed digital miniatures to be recruited onto a crew. At early access launch, we'll see three captains and dozens of potential crew members, each with their own distinct power sets, movement styles, and support capabilities.

Equally important, each of these characters has their own incredibly detailed digital miniature, crafted and posed with the same care you'd expect from a high-end tabletop skirmish game. Each comes with a default paint scheme, but like physical miniature games, the game includes a robust painting tool so that you can customize each character to your liking.

Customization tools go far beyond simple skins in a hero shooter or RPG. Players have a full suite of digital paint options to make each character their own. Dry brushing, stippling, decals, washes, airbrushing – the game allows you to apply many of the same techniques used by expert miniature painters but also



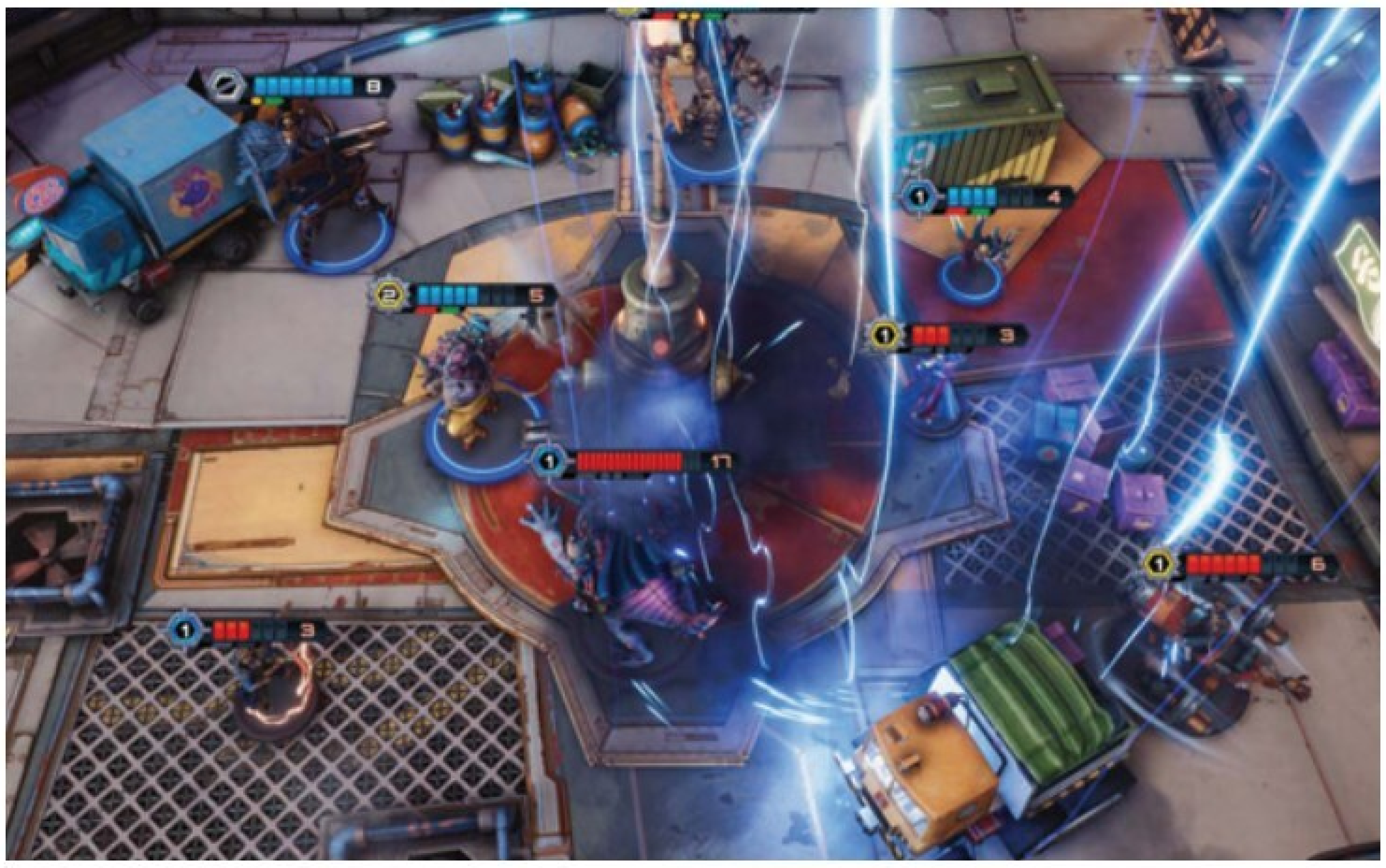


provides tools like auto-masking to get a clean and desirable look without extensive practice. The system allows for as much or as little tweaking as you might like.

With minis painted, I was fascinated as those figures dropped into a gridless turn-based tactical battle system. In a given match, each player starts with their captain deployed on opposite sides of a carefully crafted map – think the most extravagant miniature table setup you can imagine, but placed into digital form. On each turn, Cinder powers special abilities or can deploy new units onto the isometric field as drop pods from your ship, creating an intriguing choice. Unlike many other tactical games, it also leads to a rewarding escalation in any given fight, from just a few units to a furious melee. In addition, players have access to two ship assist powers in each battle – tide-shifting abilities that come hurtling in from orbit to turn the fight to your favor.

Beyond single matches, Moonbreaker also includes a single-player roguelike mode called Cargo Run. You battle through increasingly tricky matches against AI opponents using a pre-set crew, gathering cargo drops offering upgrades or new crewmembers that last through the rest of your run. The rule-breaking and high-powered fights that ensue are especially challenging.

Whether in Cargo Run or match play, players earn experience that gradually unlocks rewards along a seasonal track. At early access launch, the game has a premium model rather than free-to-play, with purchase unlocking full access to the seasonal structure, at least through the entire early access period.



As a longtime tabletop gaming enthusiast, it's hard to overstate how much Moonbreaker seems to "get" what's fun about the experience. It's clear that Unknown Worlds is not looking to replace the fun of those physical experiences, just as games like Hearthstone or Gwent haven't eliminated the thriving card game scene. Instead, Moonbreaker appears to be a love letter to the hobby and a vibrant new science fiction universe to discover. I'm eager to see how the game continues to evolve as early access begins. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Krafton
DEVELOPER Unknown Worlds **RELEASE** September 28 (early access)

NHL 23

Smoothing the ice

Each year, every NHL team strives to put the best squad it can on the ice. Sometimes, that means a full offseason overhaul. In other years, that means fine-tuning some lesser areas of an already solid team. NHL 22 was a good-looking game, but the gameplay felt long in the tooth and in need of changes. While NHL 23 doesn't rebuild the gameplay from the ground up, it does offer several features, tweaks, and enhancements in hopes of being better than the last iteration.

NHL 23 represents the series' second entry using EA's Frostbite engine. As such, various refinements come online as the development team further familiarizes itself with the proprietary engine. EA Vancouver is also implementing several gameplay tweaks, including last-chance puck movement. This adds hundreds of new stumble animations triggered through any level of contact, plus additional plays that can turn any loose puck into either goal-scoring or goal-clearing plays. However, scoring won't be easy, as goalies benefit from improved A.I. and more than 350 new save animations. Teams also have better power play and penalty kill strategies, with enhanced roles for specific players in the formations.

Franchise players rejoice, as NHL 23 implements many options for Custom Franchise mode, which should partner well with the custom roster options from NHL 22. Here, NHL 23 lets players create a Franchise experience catered more precisely to what they're looking for. Players can choose the number of teams ranging from 6 to 48 squads and have complete control of the teams, conferences, divisions, salary caps, dynamic schedules, and formats for the regular season and playoffs.

NHL 22 took a page out of the Madden playbook and introduced Superstar X-Factor abilities for the league's top players. NHL 23 doubles down on X-Factors, adding some new abilities while updating others. For example, the Truculence ability now makes A.I. players more aggressive when going for hits, while the all-new Relentless X-Factor plays into the puck-movement enhancements by improving a player's ability to perform off-balance or desperation plays on the puck.

In another instance of taking further inspiration from the Madden franchise, NHL 23 emphasizes the atmosphere within the arena. Crowds are now more aware, reacting to momentum shifts, the score, time remaining, and blown power plays. Arenas also feature better light shows and on-ice projections. The presentation better captures the energy from big-win moments; you'll know the difference between a blowout win and a walk-off goal in overtime. This goes hand-in-hand with improved player models and faces and better degradation of the ice and boards throughout the game.

Finally, cross-platform play is coming to NHL 23. Now, players can compete in EA Sports Hockey League and Hockey Ultimate Team against players from the opposing console. This shift spells a bigger player pool, leading to shorter matchmaking wait times and better-quality matches. The only catch is this feature isn't cross-generational, meaning PlayStation 5 players can compete against Xbox Series X/S players, but not Xbox One players, and vice-versa.

NHL 23 brings several requested improvements and additions to the table while tuning the gameplay in numerous ways. Hopefully, these changes add up to something greater than the sum of their parts and prevent it from being another mediocre entry in EA Sports' hockey franchise.

BY BRIAN SHEA

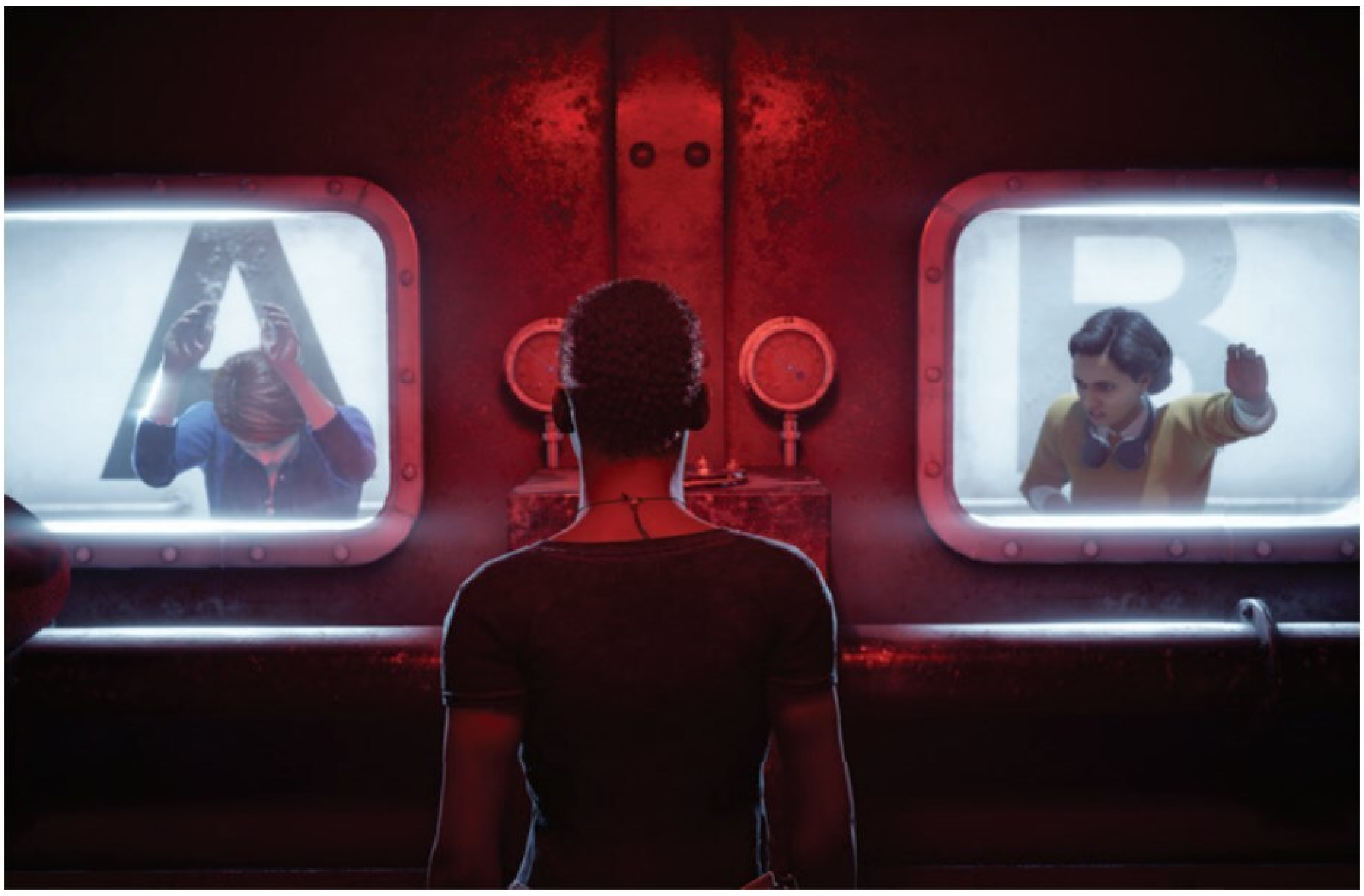
WOMEN TAKE THE ICE

NHL 23 builds off the strides NHL 22 made in the world of women's hockey by including IIHF women's national team integration in Hockey Ultimate Team, making it the first Ultimate Team mode to include the women's license. On top of that, Canadian national team member Sarah Nurse joins Anaheim Ducks' Trevor Zegras on the cover of this year's game.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Sports (12-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** EA Sports **DEVELOPER** EA Vancouver **RELEASE** October 14

THE DARK PICTURES ANTHOLOGY: THE DEVIL IN ME

Concrete burial



People are strangely fascinated with serial killers. They want to learn all about the pain and suffering they brought other people. In recent years, an entire cottage industry of podcasts, YouTubers, and mostly bad Netflix miniseries has popped up to dramatize murderers – making them morbid celebrities, often ignoring the physical and emotional pain they brought their victims and their families. People eat this stuff up.

The Devil In Me, the fourth game in Supermassive Games' The Dark Pictures Anthology, centers around H.H. Holmes – often referred to as America's "first" serial killer, though that's a bit of a misnomer as he's likely not, and instead likely America's first *known* serial killer. Around Chicago's Columbian World's Fair Exposition in the 1890s, Holmes, who owned the appropriately named "World's Fair Hotel," murdered at least 27 people (that he confessed to). Famously, his hotel was a labyrinth of gas chambers, torture rooms, and a host of other awful features.

"Things being real make our games more believable and scarier," game director Tom Heaton said in a presentation for The Devil In Me.

The story follows a TV production company called Lonnit Entertainment, making a series called *Architects of Murder*. The final episode of its first season is on Holmes, and as Heaton says, they need to knock it out of the park to get a second season. "The problem is, they've run out of money, and ideas, and content," Heaton says.

A chance call from a supposed architect and collector named Grathem Du' Met changes Lonnit's fortune. Shortly after Holmes' arrest, an arson gutted his hotel. Met claims to have inherited a hotel from a relative with an "obsessive interest in serial killers," going so far as to accurately reproduce Holmes' rooms – a stroke of good luck for the TV crew as no interior photos exist of the World's Fair Hotel. The crew travels to see the hotel on a remote island, naively agreeing to hand over their phones. When they arrive, it's the perfect setting for their season finale.

Things go predictably wrong and become expectedly deadly. Or, as Heaton puts it, we learn that Met's hotel "is in some respects, a very accurate recreation of H.H. Holmes' World's Fair Hotel."

In typical Supermassive form, we follow the individual members of the cast as they try and escape the horrors around them. Taking inspiration from both Holmes' and the Saw film series, they must escape and avoid the hotel's various death traps while dealing with interpersonal conflicts. It's up to you to decide who lives and dies during their stay – and each decision has consequences.

"[Decisions] will break friendships, make people fall in love, reveal secrets, unlock scenes, and kill people," Heaton says.

"And by the way, we believe that the deaths in The Devil In Me are the most gruesome and extravagant and over-the-top that we've ever done," he adds.

Additionally, Heaton says it includes a host of new exploration options, which allows players to interact more meaningfully with the hotel. There is also a new "simple" inventory, which gives each character several tools, including one specific to them.

Admittedly, four games into The Dark Pictures Anthology, it's hard to feel too excited, as most of its entries have been middling at best. I'm also weary of its take on Holmes; I'm incredibly put off by the fetishization of serial killers. So far, the game seems to lean into Holmes' atrocities for entertainment value gleefully. But on the bright side, it does star Jessie Buckley, who I enjoyed as the lead in this year's *Men*.

BY BLAKE HESTER

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 5-Player Adventure (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Supermassive Games **RELEASE** Fall

HARVESTELLA

Dungeon farming

Harvestella has become one of the most intriguing upcoming games of 2022 thanks to its attractive blend of action RPG gameplay and relaxing farming simulation elements. Players control a traveler who awakens in a world where the four seasons are governed by giant crystals called Seaslight. Unfortunately, a fifth season known as Quietus has spawned from abnormalities within the crystals, killing crops and producing a harmful dust preventing people from venturing outside. Quietus is known as the season of death and lasts longer and longer each year. It's up to you to figure out the truth behind the deadly season's origin in hopes of finding a way to stop it for good.

Players divide their time between running a farm and exploring dungeons and slaying monsters. Your home and farm sit outside of Lethe Village, Harvestella's primary setting, and you'll plant seeds to grow food and ingredients and even raise pets found in the wild that you can ride for transport. The farm can grow to nine times its initial size, and you can cultivate unique farmlands such as waterfront fields. Running your farm like a well-oiled machine matters because shipping crops is the only way to earn money. You'll need as much cash as possible for upgrading your weapons and purchasing goods from stores.

Spring, summer, fall, and winter last for 30 days each and dictate the types of seeds you can plant, encouraging seeking out the best for each season. The time of year also brings aesthetic changes to Lethe; winter blankets the village in a beautiful layer of snow, and spring ushers in renewed life and lush greenery. However, Quietus occurs between each season and can wipe out your hard work, so you'll have to plan accordingly to minimize losses.

The ingredients you produce can be used to craft helpful items, such as the Return Bell, a tool that lets players warp home from anywhere on the map. The Repair Kit, another tool, can quickly fix damaged structures such as bridges while exploring. You can visit Lethe to pick up side quests, including longer-form character stories when you're not tending to the farm. These missions improve your relationships with townsfolk, which progress in multiple stages.

A band of party members accompanies your unnamed hero (who can be male or female). The first ally you meet is Aria, a mysterious scientist who claims to be from the future. Like you, she too has no place in this world and the pair bond over a mutual sense of loneliness. You meet other teammates by visiting different towns in the overworld. You can even pilot a submarine to cross parts of the ocean. Along the way, you traverse dangerous dungeons where you take on a variety of formidable monsters.

Harvestella's action-oriented combat revolves around a Break system in which targeting an enemy's weak point "breaks" them, letting you inflict extra damage for a limited time. Breaking an opponent under specific conditions can achieve a double break, allowing you to dish out even more punishment. Players assign jobs to characters dictating their skills and weapon. Mages conjure long-range elemental magic attacks, while Shadow Walkers wield twin blades and can enhance their attacks. Best of all, you can instantly swap between three jobs while in battle.

Many elements of Harvestella remain a mystery, namely the world's true nature. Square Enix wants to keep such details under wraps for the time being, but those are just tantalizing carrots in an already alluring adventure. Harvestella has the makings of a surprise hit by marrying two popular genres. We can't wait to see how it comes together when it launches on November 4 for Switch and PC.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix
RELEASE November 4

BOUNTY STAR

Tex mechs

Bounty Star (or the Morose Tale of Graveyard Clem) offers another example of an age-old truth: everything is better with mechs. Blending a southwestern aesthetic with giant robots, all wrapped up in a third-person action game, players control Clementine McKinney, a bounty hunter, ex-soldier, and mech pilot. She's trying to wash away the dirty deeds of her troublesome past by protecting the Red Expanse, a post-apocalyptic version of the American southwest.

Clementine keeps the peace with the help of the Desert Raptor MKII, her trusty mech suit. You can kit the Desert Raptor out with a variety of weapons and defensive bells and whistles. Players have many tools of destruction, from peppering targets with machine gun fire to blasting them to scrap using rockets to slicing them apart with a laser sword. Need protection? A riot shield can help with that. You can also equip traversal-based upgrades such as dash boosters.

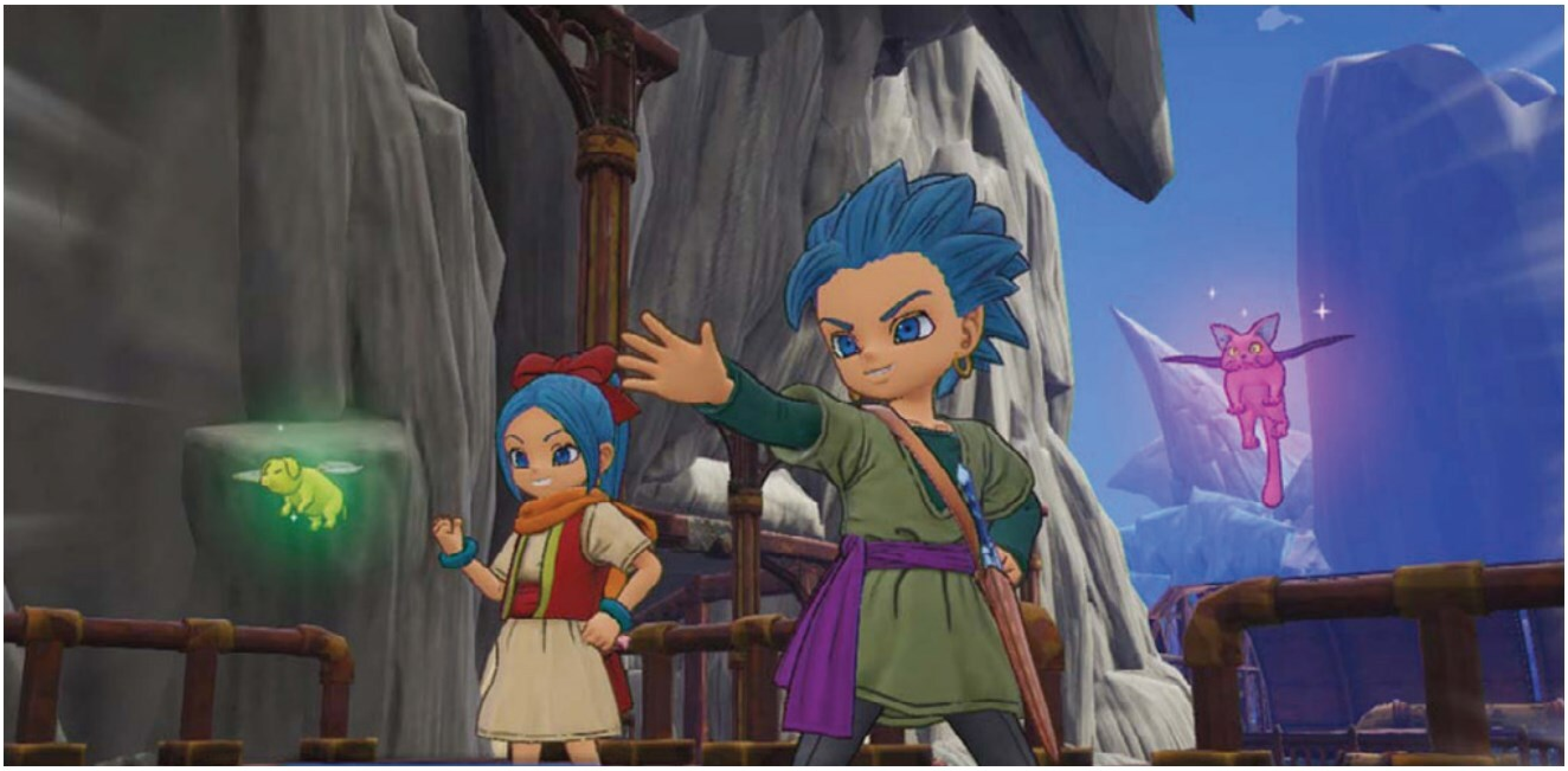
We don't know how large the Red Expanse truly is, but players will spend most of their time hunting down bounty targets across its dust-covered landscape. Developer Dinogod says you can pursue bounties in any order you see fit, and you'll be stomping across red rock canyons and desert highways to uncover their hiding spots. Combat appears as explosive as you'd expect. The reveal trailer showed Clementine unleashing hell on robotic enemies such as buzzsaw-spinning drones and, of course, rival mechs.

When Clementine isn't capturing bounties, she'll hang back at her homestead, which can be upgraded to better facilitate your quest. Players expand this headquarters by installing new infrastructures such as power supply lines and water routes. Sustain yourself by raising animals and growing food for cooking meals. You can even keep the Desert Raptor fully stocked by manufacturing your own ammunition. It's unclear how much time we'll get to spend on this aspect of the game, but it sounds like an engaging palette cleanser from the mech-on-mech conflicts.

Backed by a spaghetti western soundtrack composed by Brother Dege, Bounty Star looks to offer a promising twist on both westerns and the typical post-apocalyptic fair. For some reason, we don't often see non-Japanese mech games, and we're always excited to blow things apart inside a bi-pedal war machine. Put on the suit one more time when Bounty Star launches for PlayStation and Xbox consoles (including Game Pass) and PC sometime next year.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive **DEVELOPER** Dinogod **RELEASE** 2023



DRAGON QUEST TREASURES

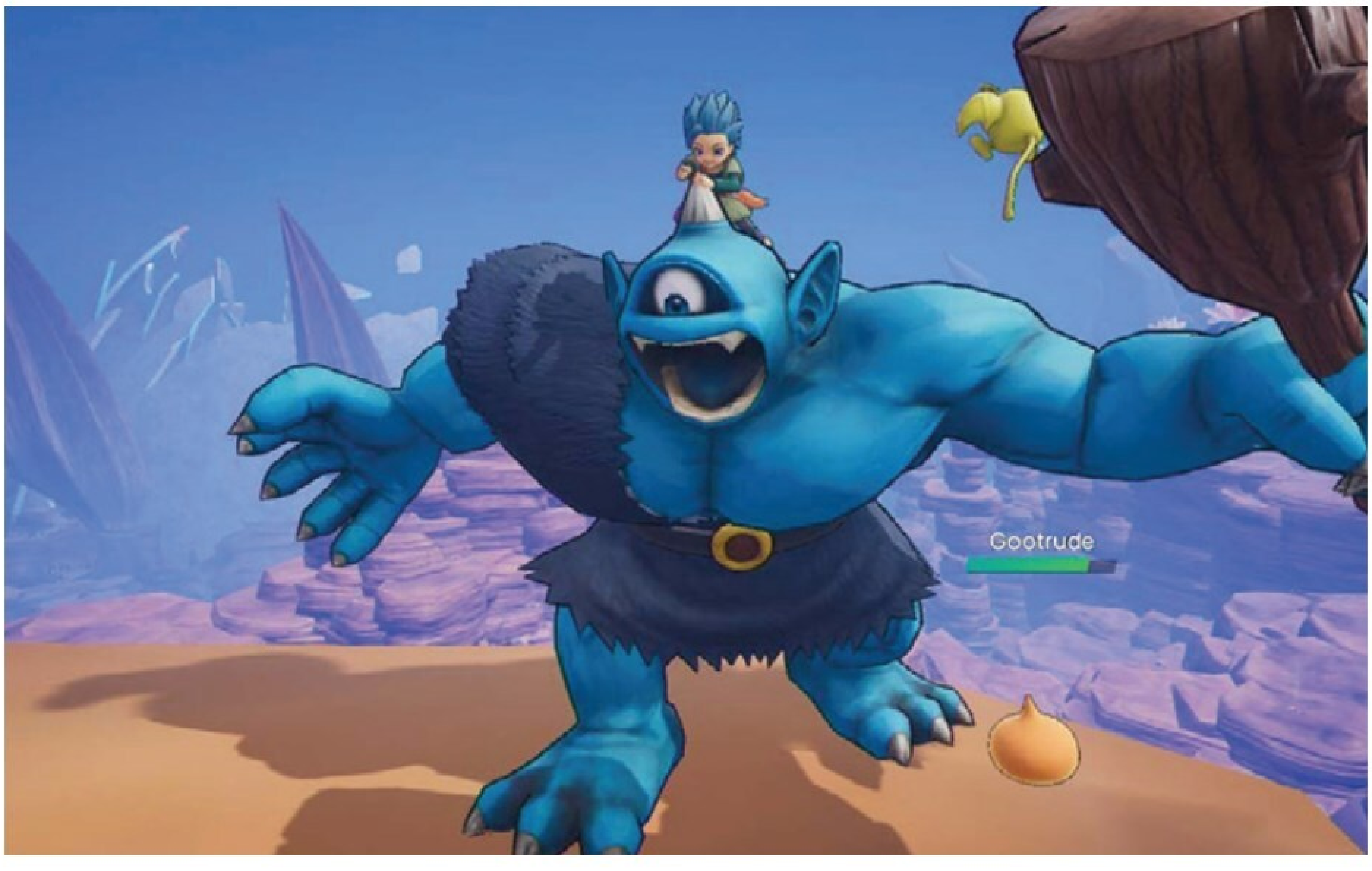
Riches more precious than gold

Mia and Erik are back in their own spin-off adventure. Taking place before Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age, the two siblings, now reimagined as children in Dragon Quest Treasures, are committed to recovering the seven Dragonstones and becoming legendary treasure hunters. The classic Akira Toriyama art direction feels as light-hearted as ever with a low-stakes loop, including navigating a fantastical world, collecting rare loot with a fortune finder device, recruiting monsters, and defeating enemies along the way.

When we meet the dual protagonists, they're down on their luck, living within the cramped confines of a Viking ship. It's not until the siblings encounter Porcus and Purrsula, creatures from another world, that they're guided to a ruin housing ancient Dragon Daggers, magical items that whisk them away to Draconia.

Dragon Quest Treasures offers a different take on the franchise's traditional role-playing system. Build bases and expand them with the riches found exploring the various biomes of Draconia. Thankfully, you can mount recruited monsters to travel long distances faster and even use their abilities to overcome environmental obstacles. Slimes bounce you up to higher ledges, and bat-like Drackies help you glide through the skies. More importantly, monsters are battle buddies that'll fearlessly defend your base from rival gangs looking to steal your treasure. As Mia and Erik, you'll amass a party of faithful, powerful monster friends and unearth the true nature of the Dragonstones this December.

BY JASON GUISAO



PLATFORM Switch
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix
RELEASE December 9

CRISIS CORE: FINAL FANTASY VII REUNION

Embrace your dreams, protect your honor

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Reunion is the second coming of everyone's favorite spiky-haired hero/heartthrob and, no, I'm not talking about Cloud. Zack is back, but this time his journey through Wutai and the Midgar slums to find Genesis has been updated for modern audiences. The augmented PSP classic boasts HD fidelity, substantial updates to all 3D models, full voiceover, and new music arrangements. Reunion is slated to be Crisis Core at its most accessible and visually stunning.

Fans of Final Fantasy VII Remake will be right at home when commandeering Zack on the battlefield as the beloved real-time battle system returns. Buster Sword strikes, AP attacks, and materia magics still provide a satisfyingly tactical loop. Moreover, monstrous bosses peppered throughout the story will undoubtedly put player micromanagement to the test. Exploration gameplay wasn't shown in the announcement trailer, but if Reunion mirrors Crisis Core, players will navigate open but linear areas, converse with NPCs (including Aerith!), and even complete side missions.

Reunion chronicles the origins of the Buster Sword, contextualizes the Cloud-Aerith-Sephiroth conflict, and unearths the truth about Shinra's shady SOLDIER project. As Square Enix put it, Zack's legacy gave life to Final Fantasy VII, so be sure to dive back into the retrofuturistic, steampunk world of Gaia this holiday season. **BY JASON GUISAO**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix **RELEASE** 2022

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The creator of Dead by Daylight is behind this wild mash-up of build simulator and post-apocalyptic FPS. Players craft labyrinthine outposts populated by devilish traps and bristling guards and then gain points for how many players die on their infiltration attempts. Of course, you also get to try out others' death mazes and see how you do, fighting your way through with melee, ranged, and defensive perks.

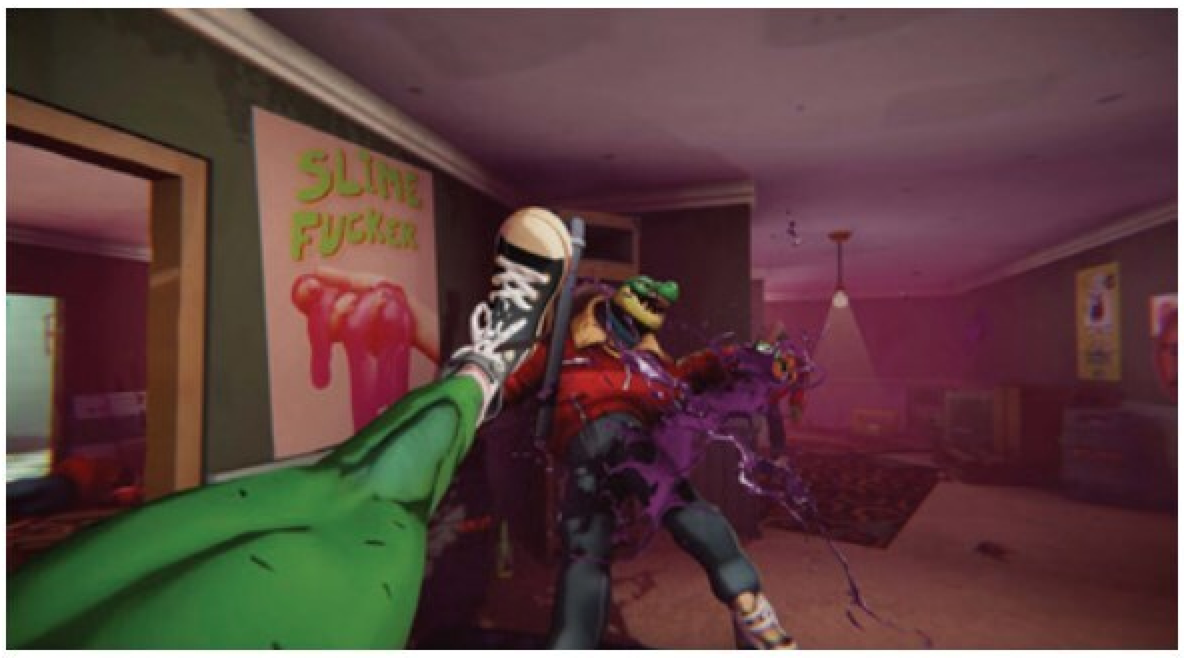
BY MATT MILLER

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Behaviour Interactive **DEVELOPER** Behaviour Interactive **RELEASE** TBA

ANGER FOOT

As the name implies, your left foot is one of the world's deadliest weapons, and you use it to restore order in S--- City. Developer Free Lives describes Anger Foot as "run, kick, repeat," but there's far more to it. As your left foot crushes enemy skulls and kicks in doors, your hands wield all sorts of weapons, making for a fast-paced shooter experience. The cartoony graphics paint a beautiful picture, and the chaos your foot unleashes on physics-based objects is a sight to behold.

BY ANDREW REINER



PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Free Lives **RELEASE** 2023

RAVENSWATCH

I was a big fan of Curse of the Dead Gods, Passtech's roguelike about the infiltration of ancient Mesoamerican-inspired tombs. The studio is sticking with the roguelike formula, but looking to folklore for its next project, playable by one to four players in co-op. Characters include a girl named Scarlet the Red Hood, the Pied Piper, Beowulf, or players can even choose to let it go as the Snow Queen. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Passtech Games **DEVELOPER** Nacon **RELEASE** 2023

GOTHAM KNIGHTS

Gotham Knights continues to impress in each new look, most recently with a detailed glimpse at Batgirl's gameplay. With her signature tonfa weapon in hand, Barbara Gordon deals with foes using a combo of kickboxing, capoeira, and jiu-jitsu. Early glimpses show her reveling in acrobatic aerial attacks, not to mention riding around on a sweet Batcycle. Expect solo play, or team up with Nightwing, Robin, or Red Hood in online two-player coop. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive **DEVELOPER** WB Games Montréal **RELEASE** October 21

DRAGON BALL: THE BREAKERS

Dragon Ball fans are getting a new action game in a genre they probably never anticipated. Dragon Ball: The Breakers is an asymmetrical multiplayer experience pitting seven ordinary citizens, including Bulma and Oolong, against a more powerful DB figure – think Frieza, Cell, or Kid Buu – controlled by The Raider. The seven must traverse an expansive map to locate Bulma's Time Machine and get home. Expect hilarious hijinks but with an explosive Dragon Ball flair when The Breakers releases this fall. **BY JASON GUISAO**

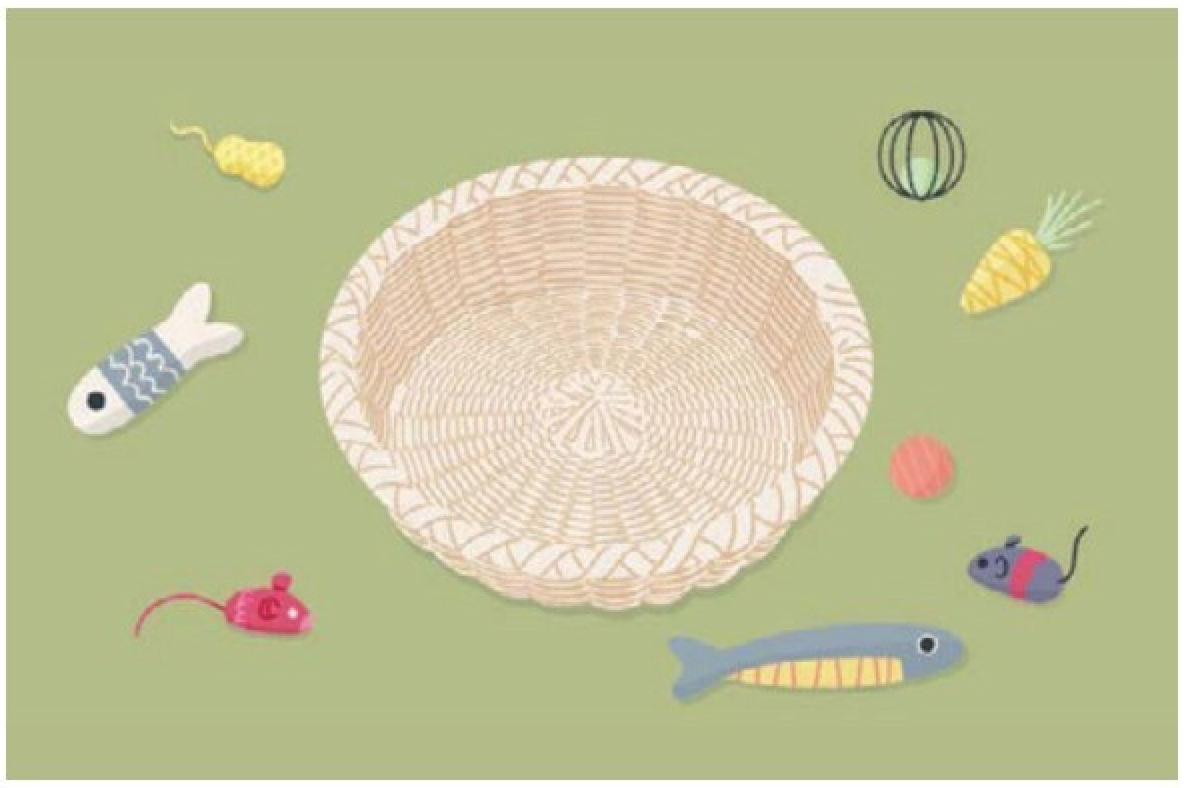
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 8-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Dimps **DEVELOPER** Bandai Namco **RELEASE** October 14

FOREVER AGO

Embark on a scenic road trip in this narrative adventure as Alfred, an elderly man on a cross-country journey of redemption. Armed with his camera, you'll document your travels in photographs while also solving environmental puzzles. From forests to deserts and the miles of highway in between, Forever Ago has the makings of a poignant, emotional field trip. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Third Shift **RELEASE** TBA

A LITTLE TO THE LEFT



A Little to the Left wants to ease your busy mind. Solve more than 75 puzzles by arranging household items into "just the right spot." However, a mischievous household cat threatens that peaceful organization. Puzzles have multiple solutions and there's even a daily puzzle mode called "The Daily Tidy Delivery." A Little to the Left is expected this year on Switch and PC. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

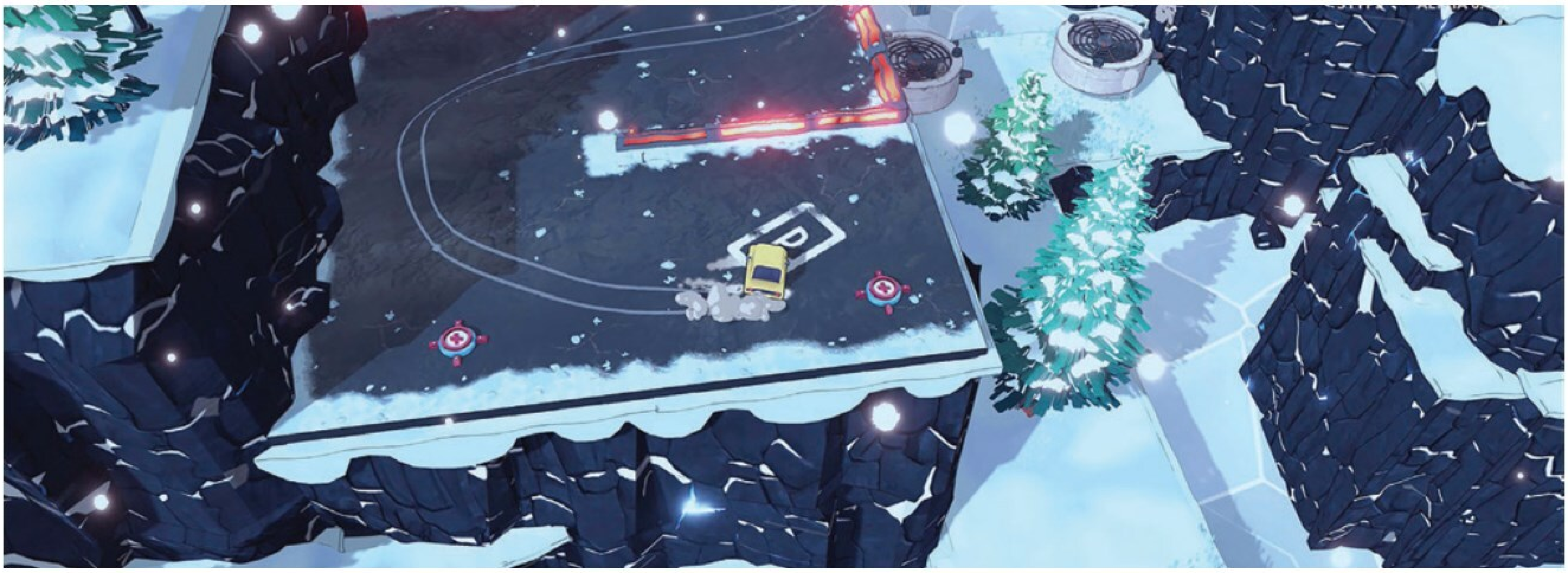
PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER Secret Mode **DEVELOPER** Max Inferno **RELEASE** 2022

FLOCK

Flock puts players in the shoes of flying shepherds who must care for a herd of bizarre-yet-cute animals. Nurturing your critters and having them soar the skies alongside you looks supremely relaxing, and uncovering new pastures and rare wildlife provides more purposeful carrots of engagement. Flying alongside friends in online co-op only sweetens the package. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE Adventure **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive **DEVELOPER** Hollow Ponds **RELEASE** 2023

YOU SUCK AT PARKING

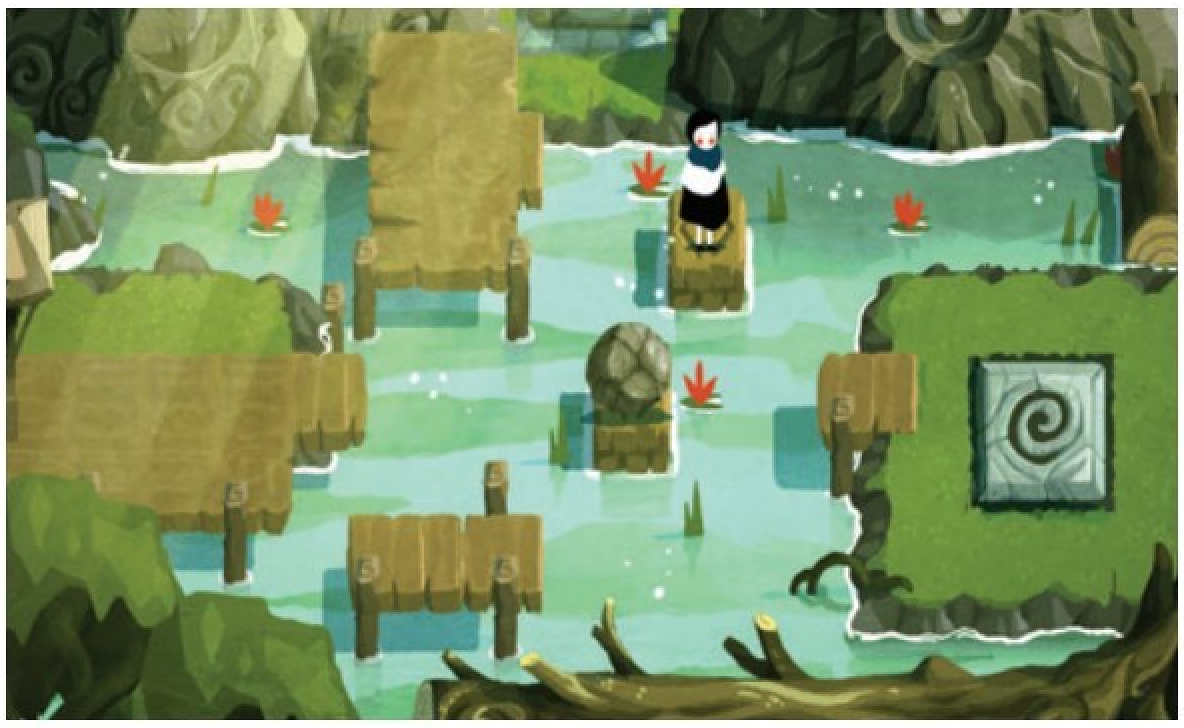


You Suck At Parking is a racing game where your objective is simple: stop. As the name implies, the goal is properly parking your vehicle in the designated spot at the end of the track. But doing so is no easy task thanks to dangerous obstacles, hairpin turns, other players, and more. It's coming sometime this year.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Happy Volcano **DEVELOPER** Happy Volcano **RELEASE** 2022

PAPER TRAIL



Paper Trail is a top-down puzzle game about Paige, an aspiring academic who leaves home for the first time to focus on her passion. Blending a watercolor and printmaking aesthetic, Paper Trail tells its story one page at a time, tasking players with rotating and dragging platforms into place in tricky environmental puzzle sequences. From mystical forests to serene swamps, join Paige on her coming-of-age story next year.

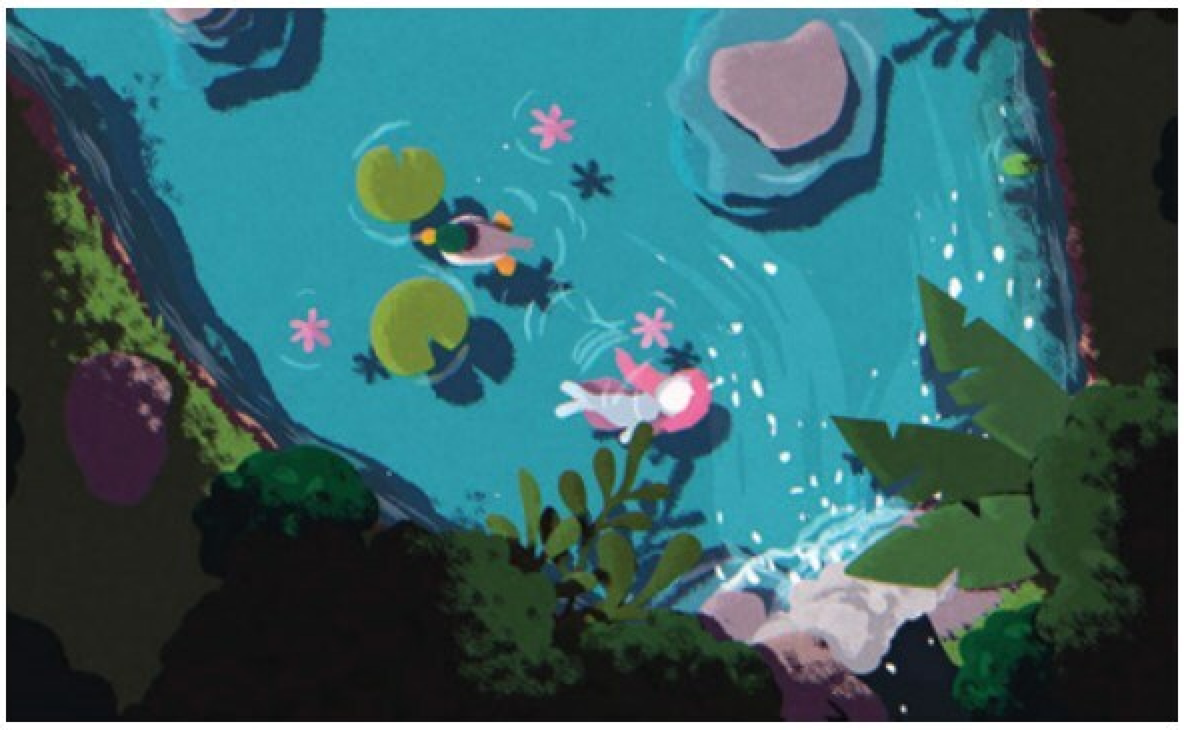
BY JASON GUISAO

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Newfangled Games
DEVELOPER Newfangled Games **RELEASE** 2023

NAIAD

After playing the first 20 minutes, I'm charmed by the meditative simplicity of Naiad. I controlled a gentle water spirit as they flowed down their river, reuniting ducklings separated from their mother, singing to make shoreside plants bloom, and occasionally pausing in rays of sunlight to enjoy the day. There's not much challenge or complex objectives to speak of – just a beautiful excursion through the water to relax after a long day.

BY MATT MILLER ■



PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBA) **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER HiWarp **DEVELOPER** HiWarp **RELEASE** 2022

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XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

A dull knife

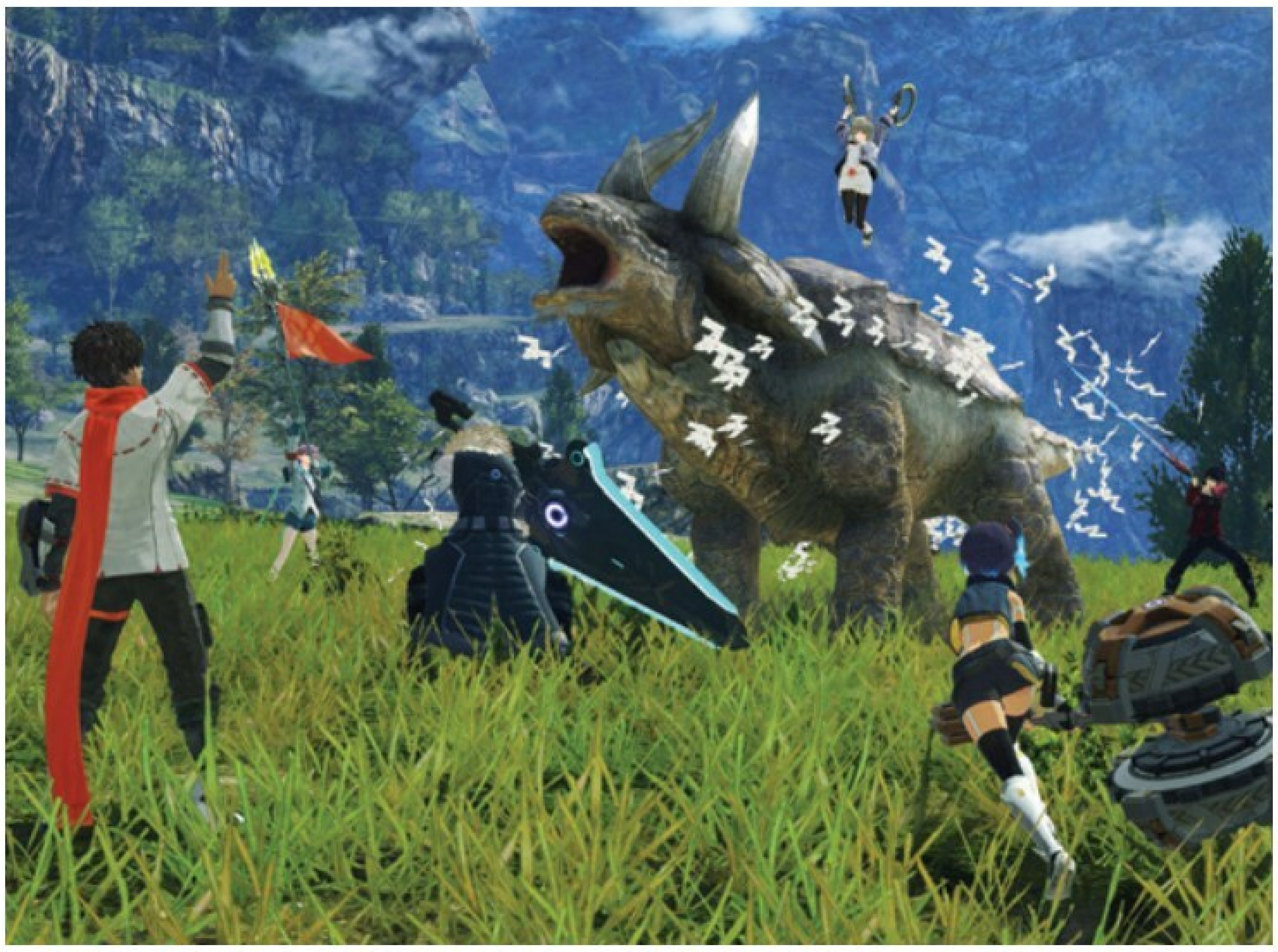
Monolith Soft has struggled to recreate and magnify the novelties of the first Xenoblade Chronicles adventure since its 2012 release. The third chapter in the science-fantasy JRPG series suffers the same frustrating fate as Xenoblade Chronicles X and Xenoblade Chronicles 2. Despite its first-rate combat and character progression features, Xenoblade Chronicles 3 is a bloated trek across vast but lifeless environments further diminished by an unaffecting narrative with one of the worst ensemble casts in the franchise.

XC 3 employs a real-time battle system where "Arts," advanced skills mapped to the controller's face buttons, give fights a natural, straightforward cadence. By canceling auto-attacks into Arts while balancing cooldown timers, I made quick work of most early-game enemies. However, seeking stronger challengers defending rare treasures or simply grazing off the beaten path forced me to reconsider conventional attack patterns and interact with every mechanic. From taking control of a healer and issuing a "group up" tactic so I could save my team with wide-reaching AoE Arts to toppling staggered enemies with combos, every decision I made felt valuable and rewarding.

Classes add more excitement to the loop. The six playable party members can learn any class, encouraging me to experiment with combinations. Even seventh "hero" characters, recruited from main and side quests, offer rarer, hybrid classes to choose from. Some of my fighters touted robust health and defensive stats, making them shoo-ins for tank classes, while the dexterous were better suited for DPS roles. Each class came equipped with its own set of Arts/passive skills and was a joy to play. I liked drawing aggression with heavy guard taunts and then switching to a dual-sword attacker to pierce the preoccupied foe in the back. Healing the squad moments before a devastating strike made mid- to late-game engagements invigorating.

My favorite combat features were Interlinks and Chain Attacks. Both are activatable after filling gauges by performing class abilities, with the former allowing two party members to fuse into a humanoid robot called Ouroboros. These gargantuan deities eliminate swaths of opponents in one fell swoop or even the odds with mighty bosses. Chain Attacks are team-wide specials that dramatically slow the action, allowing a sequence of character Arts to not only dole out severe damage but also enable bonuses like reduced aggression and high evasion. Interlinks and Chain Attacks were power trips that always made me smile, even when my patience with the plot and exploration wore thin.

The Keves and Agnus nations are locked in perpetual conflict, with both sides suffering tremendous losses. Soldiers are subject to morbid, bloody 10-year lifespans. So, when Noah, Eunie, and Lanz join forces with Agnus operatives Mio, Taion, and Sena, the crew settles on new goals: end the intercultural violence, defeat the "true" enemy, and find a righteous reason to live. This premise is eerily similar to last year's Tales of Arise. Where infectious, likable personalities remedied that game's occasional thematic blunders, XC 3's protagonists are forgettable caricatures that lack the emotional complexity a story of this nature requires. Stiff cutscene animations coupled with mind-numbingly repetitive barks – "I'm the MVP!" or "That's a rare doodad!" – do the six champions no favors.



This superficiality extends to the explorable backdrops, which lack the awe-inspiring points of interest and vistas from previous Xeno entries. These open-world zones are chockful of dangerous creatures, from flying stingrays to ferocious, kaiju-sized apes and collectible items which can be sold for a profit or submitted to fetch quest NPCs. Beyond challenging monsters, collecting respawnable drops, and recruiting heroes at Keves or Agnus settlements, there's not much to do or see. The generic locales – forests, deserts, mountains; you can probably guess the rest – were barren spaces I'd navigate for hours to arrive at the next underwhelming story checkpoint.

Thankfully, character progression systems helped alleviate the monotony. XC 3 offered an impressive number of ways to amplify the strength of my party. At camps scattered throughout each biome, I'd level everyone up, craft gemstones that increase specific stats, and cook meals that affect XP and CP (Class Point) gains. There's even an Interlink skill tree that let me augment the combat prowess of my Ouroboros. Smaller-scale upgrades, like improved running speed or meal effect duration, came from completing fetch quests, speaking with NPCs, and freeing Keves or Agnus settlements – this usually amounted to working alongside a hero to beat a powerful adversary. The customization depth made gameplay more enjoyable, but after dozens of hours doing the same activities to bolster my combat efficiency, the sheen wore off.

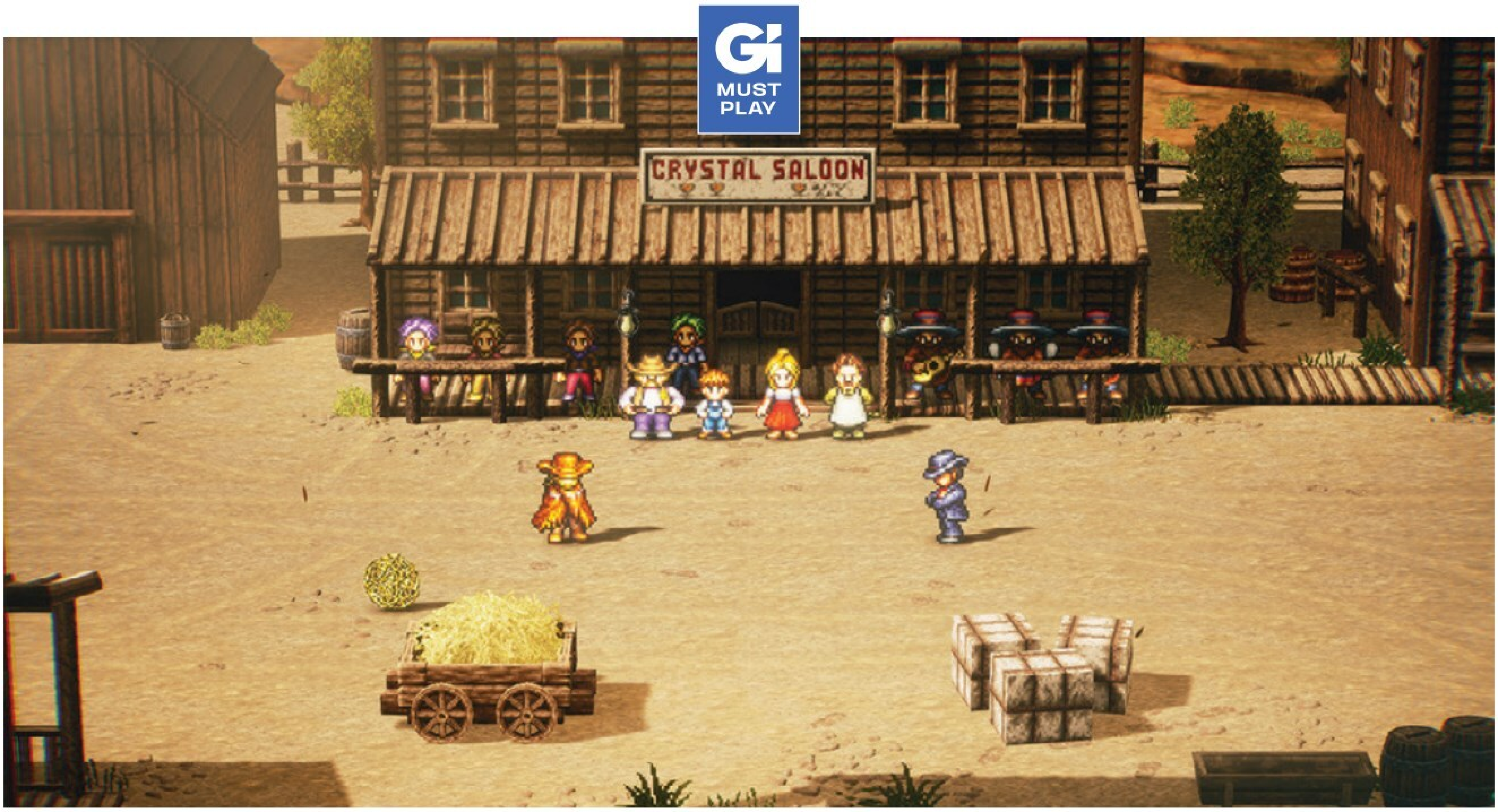
My party of seven felt like a little army when explosive Arts and flashy Ouroboros combos lit up an already-chaotic battlefield. And the quality-of-life improvements like customizable shortcut hotbars and in-game GPS streamlined menu-surfing and traversal. Still, the narrative and world designs left much to be desired as critical plot twists are frustratingly obvious, character growth is virtually nonexistent, and navigation in each uninspired environment proves to be a tiring exercise. Xenoblade Chronicles 3 is a double-edged sword that needs a bit more sharpening. **BY JASON GUISAO**

7.25

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Monolith Soft **RELEASE** July 29 **RATING** T

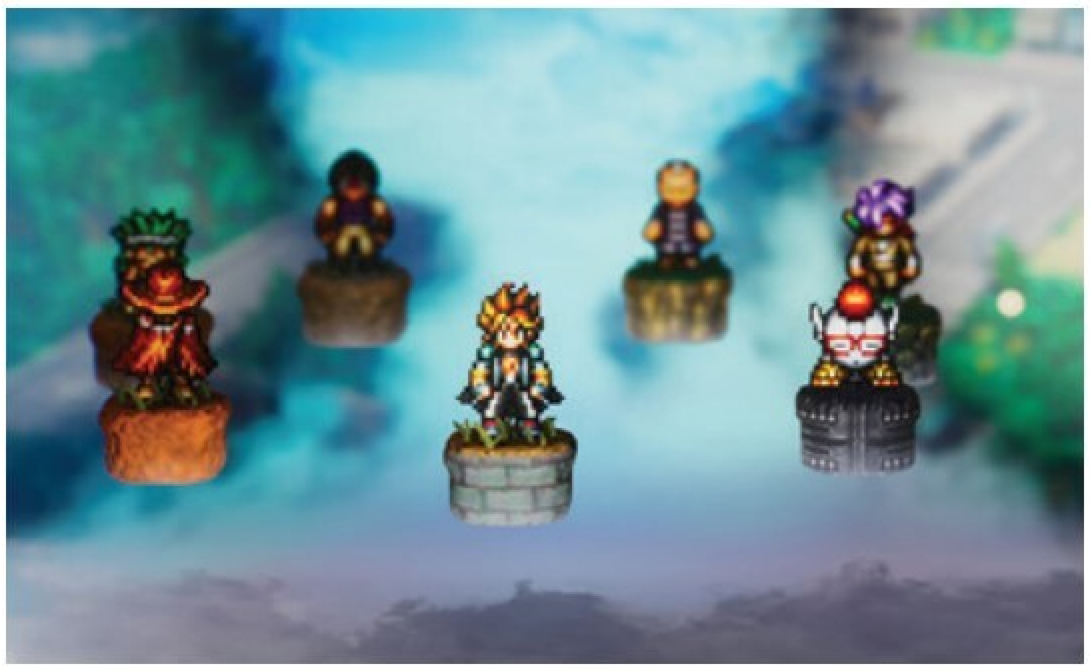
LIVE A LIVE

Sizzling short stories



I went into Live A Live expecting a time-capsule. After all, it is a remake of a 1994 Super Nintendo RPG that was never released in the U.S. But it's also from Takashi Tokita, the director of Chrono Trigger and a lead designer on Final Fantasy IV – two of the best games ever made. Even with Live A Live's design roots stretching back to 1994, little about it feels classic. The colorful pixelated characters look from the era, but most of the game is inventive, modern, and delightfully goofy (and sometimes shockingly profane).

Live A Live is unlike anything else out there, delivering an unpredictable and joyous adventure that changes its narrative and gameplay foundation every couple of hours. I'm amazed by its variety; I never knew what would happen next, both in the story and play.



Square Enix establishes a unique pulse within seconds by dropping the player onto a character select screen without giving a clue of the narrative's general direction. Here, the player must select their first viewpoint into a generations-spanning mystery from a batch of seven characters, each occupying a different era in time. From a troglodyte battling dinosaurs in the early prehistoric days to a robot lost in the cosmos in the distant future, each protagonist explores a wildly different story path backed by just as many gameplay changes. All seven chapters are breezy, lasting no more than a couple of hours, yet are long enough to tell interesting origin stories. Think of them as short stories that lead somewhere.

Any time you select a character, expect the unexpected. In the prehistoric era, humankind hasn't yet learned how to speak, so the entire story is pantomimed, and the exaggerated expressions are consistently funny. In the present-day scenario, the story unfolds through a fighting game format, complete with a ladder of opponents and a final boss at the top. In the near-future chapter, the character can read minds, which takes NPC interactions to new heights and gives the tale a fun superhero vibe. I do have to give a warning that the humor in the entire game goes well beyond what you would expect, including a comedic sequence in which you click through the moans of two people making love. All timelines are thematic successes unraveling through beautifully rendered visuals using the dev team's same HD-2D style for games like Octopath Traveler and Triangle Strategy.

The Wild West scenario, which puts the player in control of a Clint Eastwood-like drifter trying to save a town from a bandit incursion, has all its elements working. The characters are fun to follow, the humor is excellent (and irreverent), exploration is rewarding, and the gameplay is fun. After getting to know the townsfolk, you scour their houses and businesses for supplies to create traps, assigning their creation to the people you meet, hoping they can set them before a timer reaches zero. If you choose correctly in your assignments, the traps that work limit the number of bandits you battle. This chapter's combat offers a fun mix of boss battles, most carrying a "high-noon standoff" intensity.

The Wild West chapter is easily the best, but most are enjoyable, even if they stumble in unique gameplay executions. For instance, running across the rooftops as a ninja in feudal Japan is invigorating, but the confusing design of the sprawling open area leads to some unwanted backtracking and general uncertainty as to where to go next. Thankfully, the ninja's unique invisibility ability limits the number of encounters when lost.

Highs and lows are also present in the distant future scenario. Figuring out why people are dying on a space station is a great narrative thread, but it sadly pushes you to ride an elevator far too often to uncover the mystery. Given your brief time with each scenario, the irritations don't sting much, allowing the great content to bubble to the surface and stick with you as you move to the next chapter.

Some chapters have open areas to explore. Others don't. Some stories lean heavily on combat. Others limit it to a battle or two. Some encounters are random. Others aren't. I can't stress how much fun it is to discover what each scenario offers. Combat's overall design is the one gameplay element that is the same in each chapter. Live A Live makes good use of a turn-based grid system, pushing the player to be strategic in where they stand when using specific attacks, abilities, and items.

Even though you only spend a couple of hours with each main character, there's good reason to level them up and give them better gear. Bosses are no joke and can make short work of an under-leveled character. Each level grants a character a new attack or ability and stat boosts across the board. For instance, if you don't hit level four in one area, you may not get a useful healing ability or an attack that exploits a boss' vulnerability. This design encourages thorough exploration and pushes you to take on every foe. Most of your time is spent walking and talking, but the shape it takes and pacing is quite different in each scenario.

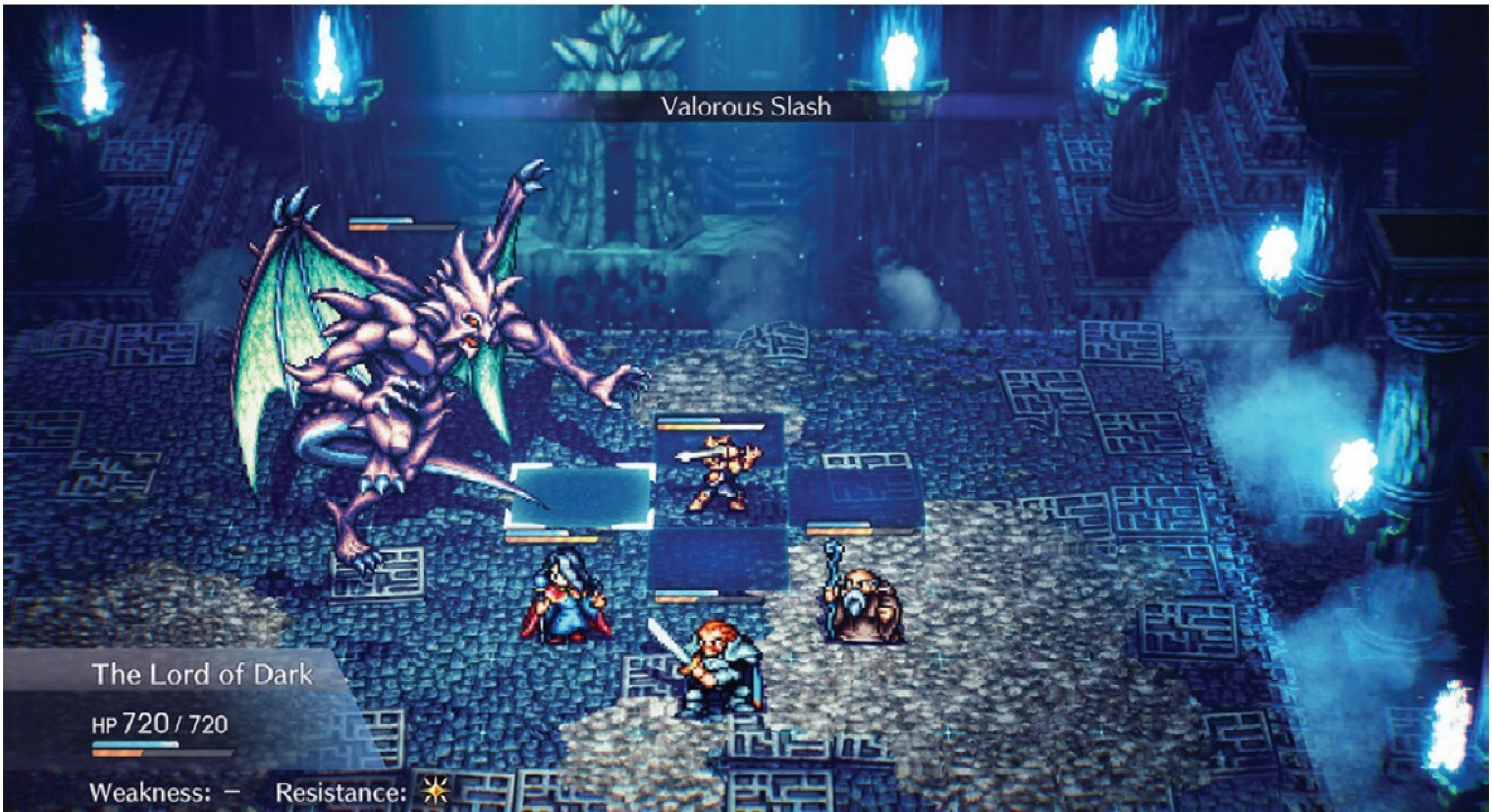
What happens after completing all seven chapters? That's another big mystery that kept me playing long into the night. I will say the payoff is well worth it, both for the additional gameplay that unfolds and how the narrative unites the threads in a mystical or sci-fi way. On that note, the final chapter delivers player choice, so make sure you save the game before starting so you can revisit later to see how it changes.

We'll never know how Live A Live would have fared in the U.S. back in the day. Flash forward nearly three decades, and I can't recommend this revitalized relic enough. It's that good. This is another must-play Switch RPG that entertains in ways I didn't expect and kept me glued to the screen for well over 20 hours.

BY ANDREW REINER

9

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix **RELEASE** July 22 **RATING** T



MUST PLAY

AS DUSK FALLS

No punches pulled

Decisions have unforeseen consequences. Life is filled with decisions big and small that shape the future, and we don't always know how an errant word or turn down a different road might eventually conclude. Interior/Night's emotionally rich and risky debut game As Dusk Falls isn't interested in giving you a choice in how the character's lives turn out; like in real life, that's impossible to predict. Instead, the studio has crafted an intricate series of character portraits linked together by shared trauma, and asked the players to decide how to proceed. The nuanced narrative that unfolds is rewarding, often painful, and frequently gripping.

As Dusk Falls is a crime tale primarily focused on two families brought together by a burglary gone wrong, a subsequent hostage situation, and its involved and lengthy aftermath. Two sympathetic point-of-view characters lead the charge – a down-on-his-luck middle-aged father and a conflicted young man torn by his family bonds – but the broader cast of characters is universally believable and memorable.

Dramatic scenes play out in smaller intimate moments and larger high-energy action scenes, like car chases or police raids. In both cases, conversations come across as natural, thoughtfully written and acted, and emotionally fraught. Sometimes, situations are heavy-handed in tone, but even those moments feel in-line with the type of TV stories that were probable inspirations, like *Breaking Bad*, *Justified*, or *Fargo*.

While it takes a bit to get used to, the unique art style does a lot to emphasize key moments and keep the many pauses for decision-making from feeling jarring. Live-action actors played out the scenes, after which paused motion art was overlaid on top. The continuous flow of dialogue juxtaposed with the lightly animated frames of visuals lend some of the best traits of both film and comics.

Through a combination of controller usage, mobile apps, and even Twitch chat while broadcasting, As Dusk Falls features a robust approach to multiplayer. The majority rules as choices play out, leading to an intriguing set of often unexpected outcomes and likely many conversations that start something like: "I can't believe you selected..."

While multiplayer is handled well, it's undeniably odd subject matter for a shared experience and certainly not played for laughs. The story is unflinching in its approach to content. It includes weighty issues like marriages in trouble, child endangerment, post-traumatic stress and depression, and even suicide – though the last of those is given a content warning ahead of time with the option to skip. If you choose to play with friends, expect a captivating narrative, but not a lighthearted one. With that said, thanks to the ability to play on a phone and the grounded subject matter, As Dusk Falls is an excellent game to share with the non-gamers in your life, illustrating the potential for interactive drama.

I also appreciate the system that plays out in the background to contextualize and navigate the story. A branching tree of narrative choices is visible at any point, and an intelligent approach to game saves and exploration of decisions lets you see the path not taken if desired. When a key character dies, you're likely to be tempted to go back and take a different way – even if that might go contrary to the message the game is trying to relay. I also love how your choices and approach to play are tracked and fed back to you upon chapter completion, providing critical insights into both the characters as you've shaped them, and perhaps even your inclinations.

As Dusk Falls hides many secrets down the winding paths of its story web, and by its nature, you won't get the full picture in any single playthrough, encouraging replayability. But you may also be tempted to play through one take on the story and then step away, content that you've seen "your" version play out. Either way, this is a weighty and gratifying excursion into interactive drama, confident enough in its writing to not rely on superpowers or fantasy. For players interested in the progress of interactive narrative frameworks, it's a laudable success. But even for someone who never plays games, it works. That's because good characters and storytelling make for a universal experience, and this is a project that has both. **BY MATT MILLER**

8.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 8-Player Adventure (8-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Interior/Night **RELEASE** July 19 **RATING** M

DIGIMON SURVIVE

Teenage wasteland

Gathered after a tragedy befalls our group, I attempt to calm down and plea that we should trust one another. Blood's been spilled, and tensions are at an all-time high for this lost party of teens trapped in a dangerous land. That's not quite the scene I had imagined going into Digimon Survive, a tactical RPG by way of a visual novel based on the sometimes-kid-friendly monster franchise. The dramatic dynamics at play are gripping, but the grid-based battles left me snoozing, souring what could have been a compelling, complete package.

You're put in the shoes of 14-year-old Takuma, flocked by a cast of other young teens trapped in a dangerous world after getting lost on a school trip. Here, each child is paired with a partner Digimon through a mysterious bond that everyone hardly accepts. This unease leads to many difficult situations testing the group's trust in one another, their Digimon, and some characters' grips on reality. While the story starts slow, I'm impressed by the depth of the characters and learning the interactions and roles each plays within the group.

Early on I decided who would tend to take my side, who was prone to worrying, who was headstrong and stubborn, and the people that are difficult or insufferable to deal with. Throughout my playthrough, I loved how I had to learn to deal with each character, and with the fate of these kids' lives on the line, there's enjoyable tension. Even casual chats can be turning points for a character, setting them off on anxiety-inducing paths for everyone around them.

Accompanying each kid is a Digimon who appears as the group enters this new dimension. These creatures play a pivotal role in the story and are linked emotionally with human partners. I'm disappointed by some underwhelming evolution forms for the main Digimon, but overall, the interactions between you and the monsters are fun and rewarding. I enjoyed learning how their budding friendships pan out, leading to powerful moments in the story that I'll remember for some time.

Choices made through conversations can and will affect the Digimon and how they evolve, which is especially true with Agumon. Because emotions drive the connection between the partners, your conversation choices will affect Agumon's evolutionary tree and have overarching narrative ramifications as well. I appreciate that my journey can have many different effects on my monsters, but the part of the game where evolutions truly matter suffers considerably compared to the visual novel.

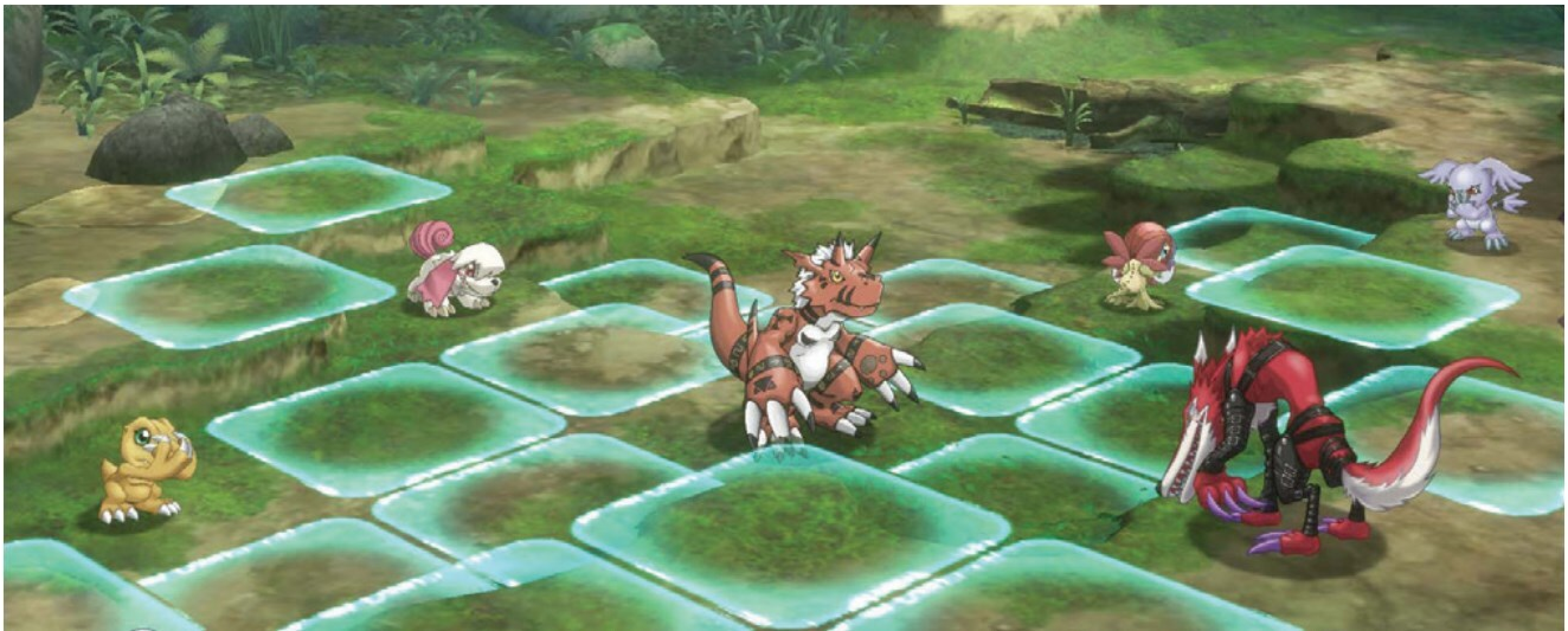
Digimon Survive's tactical turn-based combat is overly simplistic and lacks excitement and strategy. Each Digimon on the map can shuffle along the map grid to position for attacks against enemy monsters. The few times I had to juggle stages of evolution to conserve power for a last-ditch attack were stimulating. Still, that's far from the norm when most battles are far from mentally taxing encounters.

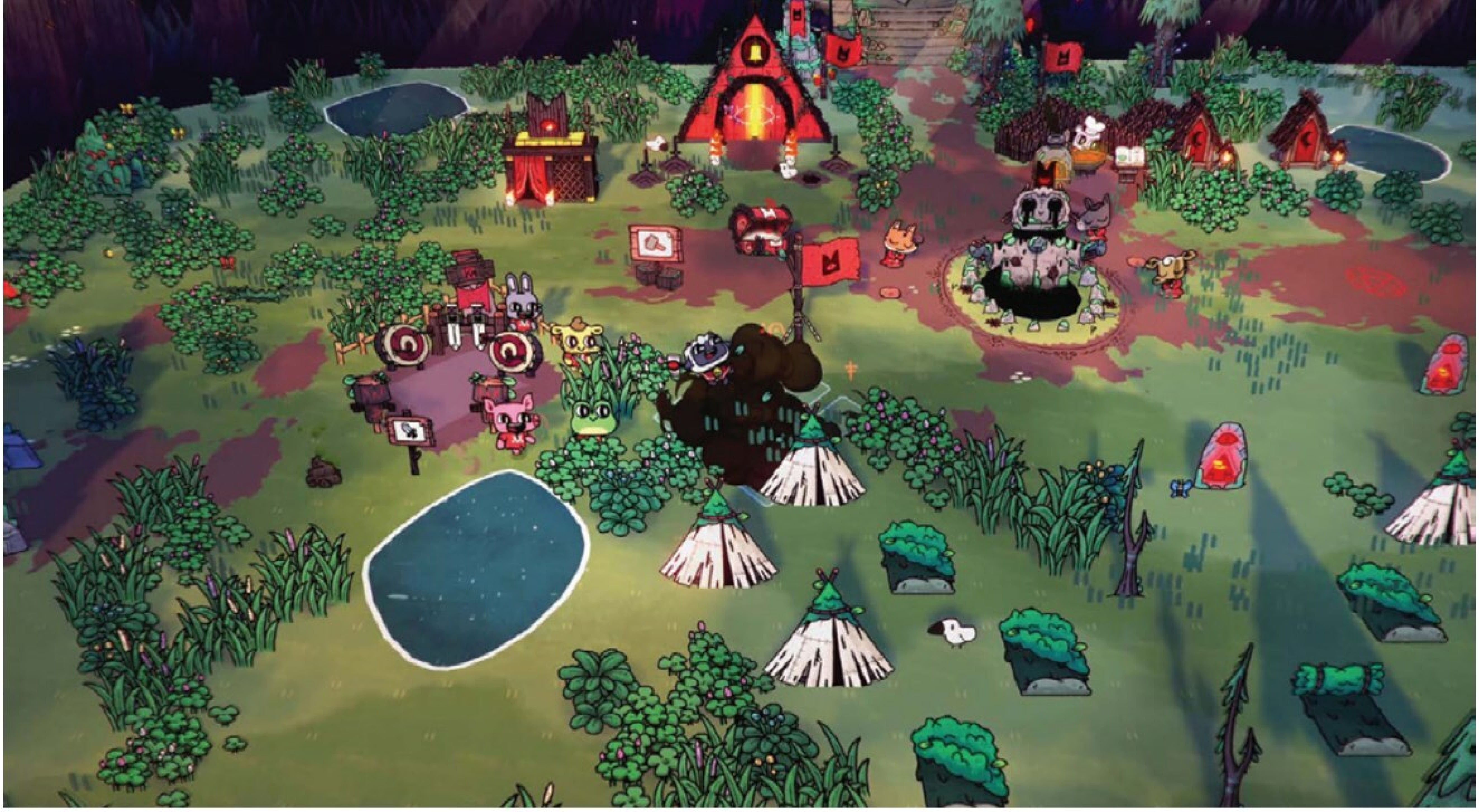
I applaud Digimon Survive for being a dark and harrowing visual novel, and subverting what I thought a Digimon story could be. While I wish the combat evolved as much as the surrounding story presentation, it's not enough to deter someone from seeing the narrative through. Don't go in expecting a tactical masterpiece, but rather a well-made melancholy tale depicting Digimon in a light they haven't been in before.

BY JOHN CARSON

7.25

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Hyde **RELEASE** July 29 **RATING** Teen





CULT OF THE LAMB

Follow the leader

I loved Animal Crossing: New Horizons back in 2020; maintaining an island was thoroughly enjoyable, but after a few dozen hours, I craved a new type of gameplay to coincide with what I was doing each day. Cult of the Lamb, a mish-mash of adorably cute critters and macabre cult-isms, remedies that issue with an expansive action-combat dungeon system. I only wish its base building provided the same satisfaction as its combat. Building and designing your cult from the ground up is fun, but you're soon pushed into using it as a means of manufacturing in-game resources, and this sometimes gets in the way of making my cult feel like home.

Cult of the Lamb's premise is simple – after being sacrificed to four gods, a secret fifth god resurrects you and tasks you with starting a cult in their name. Nearly 20 hours later, I rolled credits with a cult of more than 20 followers programmed to keep me happy and powerful. The story that fueled my time in Cult of the Lamb was enough to keep me going, but it takes a back seat to everything else. Gameplay comes first here. And for a good reason.

Combat is slick and crunchy, with each attack carrying weight as you battle through randomly arranged dungeons. One room might be jam-packed with skeletons, spiders, killer caterpillars, and cloaked assassins. Using my lamb's dodge roll, I could escape incoming projectiles and dagger slashes and then counter with my blade, which also has the chance to heal me upon killing an enemy. I closed out the dungeon using combo-heavy claws against a boss, relying on the weapon's randomly-assigned necrotic ability to fling dead enemies back at the boss as projectiles.

I also had to focus on the progression of my base, which is where my followers worship and work for me, all to make my lamb stronger so that my next dungeon run would be easier. My base began small. Over time, I learned that my base required much more to succeed. Everything builds on what's come before, and each system works because of another system happening in-game. I began to view my cult as a machine whose purpose was to worship, empower, and strengthen me more than as a place to express my inner cult designer. The importance of resource management and the stress of managing cult members' happiness by keeping them fed, completing their quests, and ensuring their loyalty often stole the time out of each in-game day. These requirements left little time to make my cult aesthetically pleasing, something I would have liked.

I began the game by naming each follower, designing them to look like one of my dogs, cat, or even my friends. But, after about a dozen hours, I was less engrossed with the simulation aspect of it all, opting to stick with default follower designs, and more focused on completing the next dungeon and upgrading the next building in my cult. That said, running through dungeons and improving my compound was satisfying, and I found plenty of enjoyment as a result.

In the post-game cleanup, I'm only now engaging with the aesthetic-serving aspects of Cult of the Lamb. I'm finally making my cult feel like mine and not one I'm sure every other player will at some point make to cultivate as many resources as possible. I only wish I had felt this earlier in my 19-hour journey. Still, everything I did leading up to it, from the fast-paced dungeon combat that never grew stale to the factory-like base building that nailed the stress of resource management, was enough and then some to keep me engaged and indoctrinated.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Massive Monster **RELEASE** August 11 **RATING** M

TWO POINT CAMPUS

Making the grade

As a kid who grew up with little money, I've always loved the fantasy that tycoon games offer: the possibility of cashing in on whimsical business schemes like theme parks, restaurants, and aquariums. It's satisfying to start with an empty plot of land and then build the foundation of a business atop it, customizing small details like paint colors, furniture layouts, and walking paths along the way.

But the genre's bubble gum aesthetics often mask a darker side – one prioritizing profit over people. More recent big-budget entries forego subtlety altogether, cashing in on oppressive industries like prisons, drug manufacturing, and even cartel operations. I'm not interested in engaging in the fantasy of generating capital from those systems.

This is why Two Point Campus feels so refreshing. You're investing in massive universities and specialized colleges to attract students worldwide, but you have to put people first if you want to turn a profit.

Between screening qualified professors, hiring janitorial staff, and expanding the interior and exterior of your campus, you'll invest in, well, less-than-normal curricula. There aren't mathematics courses or language electives. Instead, campuses host classes focused on ridiculous topics like chivalry and knighthood, wizardry, and how to be a spy. Even typical subjects like gastronomy or athletics are exaggerated, featuring conspicuous draws like car-sized hamburgers and cheese-based sports. Two Point Campus is full of surprises and even more laughs, and I loved discovering its clever twists on academia throughout its 12-level campaign.

However, there are plenty of challenges requiring a strategic mind. Every student has specific traits and personalities, and they'll drop out if you don't satisfy their needs. The only way to reach the campus ratings needed to succeed is developing an environment ripe for education, which includes managing systems like hygiene, hunger, entertainment, social interaction, campus attractiveness, and in some cases, external factors like extreme temperatures.

Some students might be great at studying, but if you don't install ample shower rooms and bathrooms, they lower your school's rating with poor hygiene. Others might drop the campus' average grade but can become relatively low-maintenance tenants with a tutoring course, or more stimulation via a music concert or jousting tournament. The same principle applies to faculty. Highly skilled staff come at a price, namely a salary, but they'll also need on-site comforts like break rooms. As you fulfill these requests, you'll unlock Kudosh, the in-game currency required for new decorations and amenities.

Therein lies the challenge of Two Point Campus. Programs require money, and there's only so much room in the budget. If you're flippant with renovation approvals, you'll be out of funds quickly, especially at campuses with a high-maintenance student body. In the case of an empty wallet, you can borrow loans, but it's easy to get into hot water fast with interest payments. This balancing act is a sometimes-frustrating-but-effective gameplay loop and one of the main reasons I love Two Point Campus. If you're feeling overwhelmed, you can change the game's speed or outright pause, giving you time to solve problems or focus on designing without the pressure of the in-game calendar.

Two Point Campus features robust creation tools, allowing me to design most things to my desired specifications – inside and outside. I especially love the new pathing tools since I prefer to build food parks and gardens outside my academics. However, sometimes I wish I had more flexibility in placing decorative items like plants or rugs without worrying about colliding with other objects. It'd be great to stack smaller assets atop larger ones like desks and tables, too.

Two Point Campus never feels callous. It's more idealistic than anything else, depicting a world where businesses and people flourish together. Profit and expansion are undoubtedly crucial to the experience, but you only achieve those goals by cultivating a top-tier environment for students. This isn't to say it shies away from low-hanging fruit; its signature British humor is at its best when poking fun at students and faculty. But ultimately, Two Point Campus is a deeply-engaging management sim that doesn't force me to punch down, and it's more enjoyable for it.

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Two Point Studios **RELEASE** August 9 **RATING** T

MULTIVERSUS

Packing a punch

Warner Bros. has given new studio Player First Games some of its most popular characters to carve out space in the Smash Bros.-dominated IP-crossover-fighter genre. MultiVersus succeeds where others have failed, but it still has some growing to do.

Though LeBron James appears on the roster thanks to his starring role in *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, the WB roster in MultiVersus doesn't feel as icky as the roster of that film. Each character is treated with reverence, creating a world where you eventually don't bat an eye at the fact that Arya Stark from *Game of Thrones* is stabbing Bugs Bunny.

The tight, Smash-like controls deftly convey the powerful and heavy Iron Giant just as well as the swift and silly Finn from *Adventure Time*. Just when I thought I found my main, I started up another character and was always surprised by how unique and interesting they were to learn.

While 1v1 and 4-player Free-For-All are included, everything is built around 2v2 gameplay. Character classes indicate traits at a glance and hint at how teams might gel. For example, Velma can hang back and cover with projectiles and buffs/debuffs, while Superman charges in to pound everyone. You can pair characters that enhance strengths and cover weaknesses, or simply go all in with two rushdown characters; all options are workable in the right hands.

The perks system plays into this directly. Character leveling unlocks boosts to speed, dodging, jumps, and more. It's wise to match up perks with your partner for a stacking bonus. Superman and Velma both have ice attacks, for example, so you can combo to increase that debuff. Unique signature perks play up character strengths as well. Even in this early state, the team/perk combos are staggering and kept me experimenting.

Despite the strength of the current basic modes, the lack of variety needs to be addressed (and apparently will be soon with an arcade and ranked mode). The limited number of maps cover standard size and layout requirements, but none of them match the creativity and detail of a good Smash Bros. level. It's neat to volley enemies off a Batmobile in the Batcave, but stages like a generic, empty coliseum and stock grassy field with waterfall left me wanting more.

Online play is fantastic thanks to rollback netcode and a massive cross-platform player base. I never had to wait for matches or deal with lag. Reindog – a new character created for the game – turned invisible a couple of times, but that was about the extent of my technical problems.

MultiVersus is free-to-play on almost every console and PC, making it easy to access. However, this also triggers microtransaction anxieties. Thankfully, the fair economy provides plenty for players who don't want to pay. Wonder Woman is free alongside a rotating roster of four characters. An early influx of gold pays for another character so you're set with 6 of 17 in the roster in short order. The remaining grind is far slower, but not too daunting. And all characters are playable in a practice area. Paid content is limited mostly to cosmetics, instant character unlocks, and the premium tier of the Battle Pass.

The current free and paid mini Battle Passes and daily quests kept me busy throughout my time with MultiVersus. While I enjoyed unlocking content, the need to grind out repetitive bot matches to hit some numbers in a reasonable amount of time can be a slog. Completed seasonal goals annoyingly didn't clear out for me, so I had to dig into the menus and turn past a page of grayed-out items to check my progress constantly.

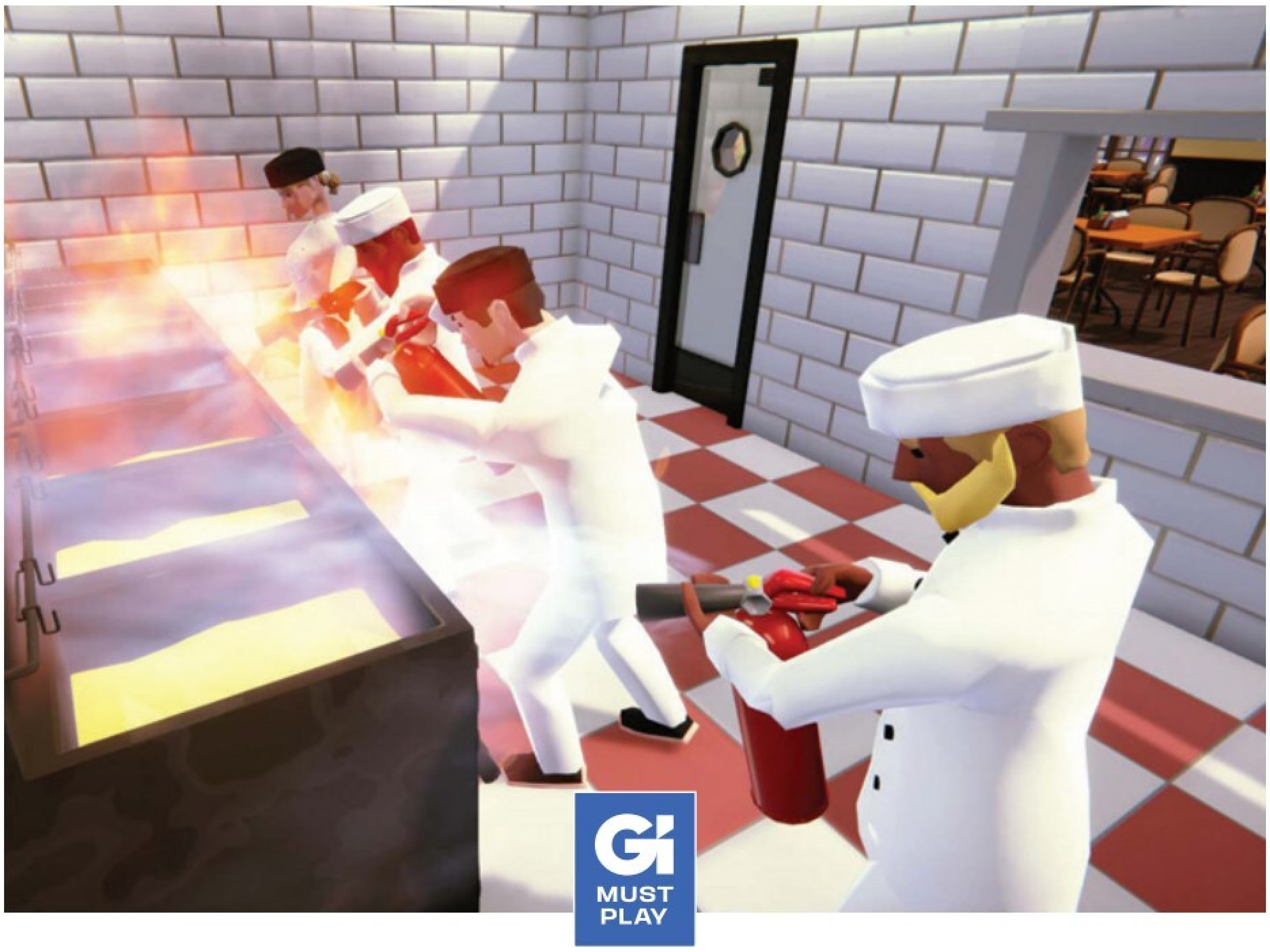
Living games have the potential to go in frustrating directions, but MultiVersus has a strong foundation. If it can meaningfully roll out content and smooth its rough edges, this could become a new crossover obsession for years to come.

BY BRYAN VORE

Note: This review is based on the open beta version of MultiVersus

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games
DEVELOPER Player First Games **RELEASE** TBA **RATING** T



RECIPE FOR DISASTER

An appetizing restaurant-management sim

Wisdom from those who have tried opening a restaurant informs you that it isn't the easiest way to make money. If Recipe for Disaster is any indication, running a successful eatery is a challenging, trial-and-error affair with plenty of stress and frustration, but one that, once mastered, offers excitement and gratification to balance it all out.

In this restaurant-management sim, you manage staff, monitor your business, and work to ensure your lights stay on. Hiring the right employees to develop a balanced team composition and designing a functional and visually appealing restaurant are important, but this game goes deeper with its management tools. I particularly love how you can drill into the menu, even allowing you to create your own recipes.

Through its intuitive creation tool, Recipe for Disaster allows you to concoct your own mouth-watering recipes. Using sequential columns, you can instruct your kitchen staff on how to prepare your latest dish. I like that this isn't a simple step-by-step layout; instead, you can have different tasks going simultaneously. Each ingredient or process you put in a recipe adds to the time it takes to cook, meaning that your chef will be pulled away for longer, and those appliances are inaccessible to anyone else. On multiple occasions, I grew overly ambitious with my dishes; it caused my kitchen to fall behind on their orders, and the restaurant crumbled as a result.

In fact, much of Recipe for Disaster operates on a delicate balancing act that had me weighing risks and rewards before opening the doors each day. Do I add a second grill to my kitchen to help with efficiency but start the day in debt? Would my dining room benefit from a couple of extra tables, or would that just inundate my kitchen staff with too many orders? Should I hire an amazing grill master with a bit of an ego and risk him walking out or annoying the rest of the staff? I loved walking the razor's edge with every choice.

Of course, things fell apart on multiple occasions thanks to overconfidence or miscalculated risks. From an over-ambitious hiring plan to a poorly designed dining room, these instances are all frustrating since they can result in game overs. Still, I appreciate how each failure let me walk away with lessons on how to address different problems that crop up. These situations also allow for memorable, emergent stories to develop, like when a health inspector arrived just as my kitchen caught on fire or when a restaurant critic came in during rush hour while my entire staff was on the brink of quitting.

Unfortunately, the baked-in stress of managing a restaurant amplifies when employees sometimes stand around doing nothing when there's work to be done or when the simulation incorrectly says an area isn't accessible, leaving me unable to realize my dream designs fully. On multiple occasions, someone came into the building looking for a job, only to never return after I hired them. Thankfully, these unintended hardships are minor inconveniences in the grand scheme of this restaurant sim.

The number of things that can go wrong during any given day is remarkable, but if you strike the right balance, the resulting satisfaction as your leveled-up staff executes your perfect plan is astounding. Watching my team effortlessly handle a bus full of people and a line out the door never failed to make me smile, and by monitoring the in-game notifications and myriad meters, I could ensure my business continued operating like a well-oiled machine. While the main presentation is clean and streamlined, with icons that accurately and efficiently convey their meaning, the user interface is often overwhelming, thanks to the sheer volume of information it needs to communicate.

Whether you're playing the goal-based scenarios or the open-ended sandbox mode, I still can't stop thinking of ways to design a perfect dining hall. Though the frustration of failure sometimes got the better of me, I often couldn't wait to get back in front of Recipe for Disaster to play through several more days of this enthralling restaurant simulation.

BY BRIAN SHEA ■

8.5

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Kasedo Games
DEVELOPER Dapper Penguin Studios **RELEASE** August 5 **RATING** NR

ONE LAST THING

THE SEASON AHEAD

Plan your fall and holiday gaming with our handy checklist of some of the biggest titles scheduled for release in the next few months

SEPTEMBER

☐ The Last of Us Part I *(PS5) – 9/2*
☐ Steelrising *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 9/8*
☐ NBA 2K23 *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 9/9*
☐ Splatoon 3 *(Switch) – 9/9*
☐ Metal: Hellsinger *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 9/15*
☐ Soulstice *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 9/20*
☐ The DioField Chronicle *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 9/22*
☐ Grounded *(Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, PC) – 9/27*
☐ Valkyrie Elysium *(PS5, PS4) – 9/29*

OCTOBER

☐ Overwatch 2 *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 10/4*
☐ Dragon Ball: The Breakers *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 10/14*
☐ NHL 23 *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One) – 10/14*
☐ A Plague Tale: Requiem *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PC) – 10/18*
☐ Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 10/18*
☐ Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope *(Switch) – 10/20*
☐ Gotham Knights *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC) – 10/21*
☐ Bayonetta 3 *(Switch) – 10/28*
☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 10/28*

NOVEMBER

☐ Harvestella *(Switch, PC) – 11/4*
☐ Skull and Bones *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Stadia, PC) – 11/8*
☐ Sonic Frontiers *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) – 11/8*
☐ God of War Ragnarök *(PS5, PS4) – 11/9*
☐ Tactics Ogre: Reborn *(PS5, PS4, Switch, PC) – 11/11*
☐ Pokémon Scarlet/Violet *(Switch) – 11/18*
☐ Evil West *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 11/22*

DECEMBER

☐ The Callisto Protocol *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 12/2*
☐ Hello Neighbor 2 *(PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC) – 12/6*
☐ Dragon Quest Treasures *(Switch) – 12/9*
☐ High On Life *(Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, PC) – 12/13*

For a comprehensive list of upcoming releases, including games with release dates yet to be finalized, visit GameInformer.com/2022

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